THE WAYSIDE CROSS

MARY E. WAAGEN

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THE WAYSIDE CROSS

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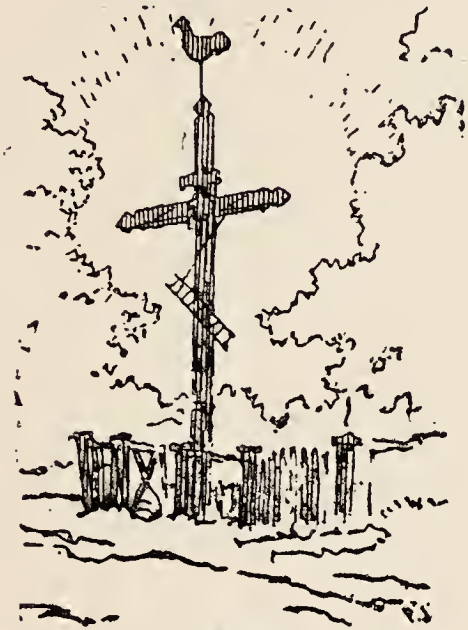

BY

MARY E. WAAGEN

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PART ONE

CHAPTER I

To "le Bon Dieu"

AT the upper corner of the first Concession Road standing in a small plot of fenced grounds is an old grey cross bearing within its tiny box shrine a statue of the Virgin with the Christ Child in her arms.

It has known many vicissitudes, this grey symbol of religion which has stood now for almost sixty years looking down upon the village below. Tho' to-day, the villagers come and go about its carefully tended plot, which in summer is kept gay with flowers; time was, some ten years back, when the passerby could not have seen the shrine for the tall weeds and grasses waving above the fence rails—some of which were completely rotted and in part, fallen away. None thought of pausing here in prayer or meditation. The only creature who might be seen was a small, neglected-looking boy stretched in the grass by the roadside, or perched upon the rail of an adjacent

fence whittling at stick or birch-bark—a mongrel dog lying at his feet.

Pierre Larrebais, or "Petit Pierre", as the village children called him, was great grandson of Onesime Laporte, the man who had first placed the cross upon the hillside. Pierre knew little of his ancestry and gave still less thought to it. What worried him more was his lame foot which prevented him from running or playing like other children. Also his father was the worst man in the parish and the old women were wont to shake their heads over Pierre, for had not his mother broken her grandfather's heart, when she persisted in marrying Jules Larrebais against all commands?

Late one August afternoon, Pierre lay face downwards in the long grass, close to the dilapidated wooden fence surrounding the old cross. Forty-five years before, Onesime Laporte had given this cross to God, but the shrine had long since entered upon a period of neglect, and stood, hovering like a grey spectre, upon the outskirts of a life of which it had once been the centre. To Pierre it was an object of no interest; no speculation stirred

"He took its gaunt form for granted as part of the landscape."

in his mind as to its origin or ownership. He took its gaunt form for granted as a part of the landscape, rather in the same manner as he did the Church down in the village below him, which his foster-mother, Madame Perrault, had once told him belonged to "le bon Dieu". He never entered the Church, unless constrained by physical force; it was not likely, therefore, that he should bother himself about the old cross. He had lain beside it this afternoon for over two hours, quite still, in the same spot—only the occasional digging of his toes convulsively into the ground, or the turning from one side to another of his head pillowed upon his arms, showed that he was not asleep. The last time he had sat up was to watch the afternoon train draw slowly into Ste. Marguerite Station. This was at half past four o'clock, half an hour after his father had beaten him and turned him out of doors. By-and-by when the fading sunset told of approaching dusk, he would limp down the hill to his cousin, Madame Dufresne's—at whose house he could be certain of securing some scraps for supper. This would not be long now, for already part of the sun's flaming

disc had disappeared behind the hills; and had Pierre chosen to look up or been in a mood to appreciate his surroundings, he might have found some solace for his sore little heart in the beauty of the scene around him.

Directly before him the road wound down a precipitous hill towards the village, crossing the mill-stream by a bridge close to Madame Dufresne's garden. It was rough and rocky—a road leading to the Concessions, running back for miles, past the old Cross to the lonely farms beyond, through waste land, up hill and down till it ended at the tenth concession where the unbroken forest stretched mysterious and dark. A hot road in summer and bare of all shade, in winter no part of the country was more exposed to Northern winds or raging blizzards. Long detours through the fields were necessary to compass the deep drifts, remains of which could be seen far into the spring time, when the robins have bethought them of returning home again and the crows are tuning their noisy chorus amidst the pine trees.

But to-night all the rugged landscape glowed warm with the rays of the dying sun.

Behind Pierre across the hilltops the whole sky was ablaze, whilst, far off, to the north east, twilight was already enfolding the hills in shades of deepening purple. Below in the village, where the glare of day had passed, a blue haze lingered, born of the great heat; thin wreaths of smoke, curling upwards from the cottage chimneys, mingled with it and vanished. As yet, no lights were lit—the valley lay at peace. The Lake was not visible from the hillside, but the river, it waters unrippled, gleamed like a silver mirror upturned to the clear sky. The only sound which reached the boy as he lay stretched in the grass, was the lowing of the cattle, and the tinkle of their bells as they returned to pasture. Pierre paid no attention to these things, he was too busily occupied with his own thoughts and his sore, bruised little body, until suddenly Bijou, his yellow dog, barked angrily, and a voice close beside him said something in a language which Pierre could not understand, but which he knew to be English. He looked up startled, and then, scrambling to his knees, stared aggressively at the two men who stood opposite the cross.

Strangers were often seen in the village during the summer months, but never before had they molested Pierre on his hillside. As far as he could remember none had ever exchanged words with him, though Madame Dufresne sometimes admitted stray sportsmen as boarders to the big square mansion, which had originally been Onesime Laporte's home. Pierre caught sight of these strangers occasionally, when seeking a precarious meal, once a day, in the Dufresne kitchen. But that any of them should invade his solitude, was a thing unprecedented. Therefore, he scowled at the visitors in unmistakeable enmity.

"Hello, where did you come from, young man?" exclaimed the taller of the two men.

"He's lame, poor little chap, don't you see?" added his companion. This man was swarthy and of slighter build than the other. He spoke with a slightly foreign accent.

In some way the child guessed that they were alluding to his foot. His face grew scarlet, and he scowled angrily.

"Handsome little chap," the first speaker broke in again. "Needs to wash his face." Marks of blackberry juice were visible around

Pierre's mouth, and the hot tears of a few hours ago had made little streaks down the dust of his cheeks, smudged whilst still wet, by the sleeve of his blue shirt. His whole appearance was as grubby as that of any little Habitant to be met with in the Province.

The dark man drew nearer. "Where do you live?" he asked in French.

Pierre stared, but made no answer.

"Don't you understand?" The boy nodded, looking fixedly at the speaker. Monsieur Gaspard, bearing the blood of old France in his viens, was of a type more familiar to this little son of the French Province than his English-speaking compatriot. "What is your name? Where do you live?" repeated the questioner.

"Pierre Larrebais—there." Pierre pointed to a ruinous-looking cabin, some fifty yards distant from the cross-road. By this time he had scrambled to his feet, and felt more of a match for these strangers.

"To whom does the old cross belong?" This in French, also, from the man who had first addressed him. Pierre thought the question stupid. How should he know to whom

it belonged? It stood there, and had done so, as long as he could remember. He shook his head and scowled once again; then, as though recollecting something, or perhaps with a characteristic desire not to displease strangers, he smiled suddenly.

"To le bon Dieu," he said. "It belongs to le bon Dieu."

He spoke so simply that neither of his listeners dared to smile.

"What a queer child," remarked the dark man, "we must ask our good Madame Dufresne about him."

"Yes, and I vote we also ask for supper. My stomach tells me it is long past the hour. Come, George, we can't stop here."

They turned away, nodding a good-night to Pierre, who stood staring after them down the hill, until they were lost to sight.

CHAPTER II

La Maison Laporte

WITH the coming of Onesime Laporte to Ste. Marguerite seventy years earlier, had commenced the history of that village—a history in which the Laporte family played the dominant role. Previously Ste. Marguerite had been only a clustered settlement, a few rough houses set down in a small clearing, in the heart of the bush. Onesime was young, vigorous, and far-sighted. His wife, also, was endowed with good health and good judgment—a thrifty housewife. In a few years a saw-mill was started; the lake and river turned to account. Men began to find their way down from Riviere-du-Loup; worked a month or two, then sent for their wives and families. The ten houses that had first formed the settlement grew to twenty. Little by little, bare patches began to show upon the hillsides, where before had been only the dark green of the for-

est; the clearing extended farther down the valley; fields of oats, buckwheat and potatoes together with patches of garden bordered the main road. Application for a Curé and the building of the little wooden church—which stood for sixty years—but has now been replaced by a substantial stone structure—followed. Then came the creamery, and Onesime's fortune was completed. The Laportes moved from their first dwelling into the big square, yellow painted house, which was to be known for full forty years as "la maison Laporte." Within twenty years of his first coming to Ste. Marguerite, Onesime owned half the country-side and his vested interests made him the great man of the district. All this, long before the railway had converted the sixty odd miles separating Ste. Marguerite from Riviere-du-Loup into a journey of but a few hours.

There were five children in the Laporte family, three boys and two girls; the eldest boy, David, was destined for the priesthood. A month after Onesime Laporte had moved into his new house a solemn meeting was held in the front parlour—a simply furnished,

almost bare room, for, notwithstanding all his success, Onesime was never ostentatious. M'sieur le Curé presided. The Laporte land ran back across the mill stream and far up on either side of the First Concession Road, which was then in its infancy. The upshot of this meeting was the erection of the grey cross at the hill top, on a little plot of Onesime's ground, consecrated by M'sieur le Curé. Onesime was a scrupulously honest man, he could not be content to receive and yet give nothing. The parish approved of his action.

It became a habit with many of the villagers, on fine, summer evenings when the sun lay level with the hilltops, to toil up the steep slope and say their prayers before the little shrine. The plot was bright with flowers, well watered and fragrant—it was Onesime's pride to see that it lacked nothing. A superstition became current throughout the village that if anything happened to the cross, misfortune would fall upon the Laporte household.

Years passed and the family continued to flourish. David, the eldest boy, graduated with honours from the Quebec Seminary; Angelique, the sister next in age, married a

well-to-do farmer from St. Octave. Shortly afterwards these two left home for the West, Angelique's occasional letters telling much of the prosperity of this new country.

Perhaps it was these letters which fermented discontent in the heart of Philippe, the youngest son—at the time of his sister's marriage, a youth of sixteen. Onesime had destined this son for the creamery, his elder brother Joseph being already at work in the sawmill. Philippe, however, thought otherwise; he was lazy and mischievous and for his part saw no reason why he should work at all. All the remonstrances of the Curé were useless; he loitered through his day's work, slouched about the village in the evening, pipe in mouth, hands thrust into pockets, ready for any folly that was afoot. He would go West, he swore vehemently to his companions—there was plenty of money to be had there. Did they think he was going to spend his life amongst a lot of Habitants, who thought they were well off because they knew no better?

That one of his sons should become the village loafer, and a ring-leader in mischief, was galling in the extreme to Onesime. For

'Known for full forty years as
"la maison Laporte."'

his wife's sake, he bore with the boy. He reasoned with him, remonstrated, stormed occasionally, when his temper failed, but it was all of little use. The years passed and Philippe remained as lazy and as perverse as ever.

About this time there was much talk of the railway, and survey parties encamped in the district. Spring had come earlier than usual that year, and the fine May weather lent stimulus to the work. Onesime, as the chief land owner, and the man whose interests would be most nearly affected by the new conditions, had many dealings with the men. He negotiated a little at headquarters, and was looked up to by the other villagers as a careful guardian of their interests. The sale of his own land along the lake shore, expropriated by the railroad, increased considerably his already comfortable fortune.

It was Madame Laporte who first remarked the frequent visits of the chief engineer, a young Frenchman, to the Laporte household. Marie, their youngest daughter, who had just passed her eighteenth birthday, was considered the brightest and prettiest girl in the district.

"We will soon lose Marie, Onesime," Madame Laporte remarked one morning to her husband, as he filled a pail at the pump beside the wood pile.

"Lose Marie!" Onesime ejaculated. "But how? Surely she is not ill!"

"Ill! Bah non! You are stupid! She grows prettier every day."

"And that is good."

"Yes, but there are others who think so too!"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that M'sieur George Decelles has eyes in his head if you have not—and Marie is not blind. He is a fine young man."

Onesime was startled, and not at all happy. "But, Marianne, you should have told me of this before. I do not know this man. It is not a good thing. I must consult M'sieur le Curé."

"Oh, but you are a man! You will make trouble as sure as the wind blows. Onesime, be reasonable."

But that evening found Onesime seated in the Cure's parlour, and two days later Marie was bidden to prepare for the annual visit to

her grand-aunt, who would need her earlier than usual this year, since the last season's cold had left the old woman much crippled with rheumatism. There were some protests certainly on Marie's part, but Onesime had never consulted his children's inclinations when any question of obedience was concerned, and, willing or not, Marie went, consoling herself perhaps with the thought that St. Pascal was not more than forty miles from Ste. Marguerite, and lay on the direct line of the survey.

A month later came letters from Quebec addressed to M'sieur le Curé by his brother in Christ, the Rev. Père Isodore Pichet. Their contents must have been satisfactory, for as M'sieur walked down the village street that evening in the direction of "la grande maison", and encountered M. Decelles proceeding with his fishing rod in hand towards the lake, he greeted the young man cordially, and even insisted that the latter should turn back and walk with him.

Had he seen M'sieur Laporte lately? Would he not come in a few minutes and cheer up

the old people? Joseph was away, and they had little comfort from that idler Philippe!

Decelles listened respectfully, but when the Curé remarked that it was time Marie returned to cheer up her parents, his expression grew more animated.

M'sieur Decelles knew Mademoiselle Laporte, did he not? Yes, he had that pleasure. She was undoubtedly a fine girl—he, the Curé had baptized her. She would make a good wife for any man, but the trouble was to find a husband worthy of her. Here the good man turned his gaze ever so little, that it might rest for a second upon his companion profile. The blood had mounted beneath the swarthy skin; the young man's lips were compressed. The Curé proceeded—What did M'sieur think on the subject? There was Jules Leconte, the baker's son, a steady fellow. An impatient exclamation answered him—M. Decelles had been of the Curé's opinion ever since he first saw Mademoiselle—for his part he was convinced the village had not yet seen the man worthy of her.

The Curé suppresed a smile as they stopped before the Laporte house.

Dusk was falling—M'sieur and Madame Laporte sat on their front verandah; at sound of the Curé's voice Onesime rose, removed his short pipe from his mouth and descended the steps to meet them. He was a big broad-shouldered man, well over sixty; not a whit less upright in his carriage than he had been twenty years before. Not a whit more polished by the added comforts of his position, than when, at the age of thirty, his sounding axe had felled the first pine tree, on the spot where the saw-mill stands to-day. He wore a suit of dark rough homespun, his neck was bare—for save on Sunday or fête days, he scorned the refining complement of collar and cravat. This evening he had not even removed his big boots, brown with traces of the soil, which had served him all day on the newly-cleared land to the east of the mill.

The Curé paused, his hand resting on the latch of the gate; Onesime strode forward and opened it. At this moment M'sieur Decelles would have wished them good-night and retraced his steps, but the Curé would not hear of it.

M'sieur must come in a few minutes—

Madame, he was sure would be glad of his company, especially as he himself had business with M'sieur Laporte, which would take them over to the Creamery for the next half hour. Onesime, seeing how matters stood, held out his hand to the young man, and bade him enter.

No one heard the conversation which passed between Onesime and the Curé that evening. Some hours later, Madame Laporte, having elicited from him all that she deemed of interest, shook an energetic forefinger in the thoughtful face of her husband, as he brooded over his last pipe.

"You will trust your wife in future, Onesime. I am too fond of meddling in such things! Am I so blind that I don't know a fine young man when I see him? Bah! You would turn sweet milk sour with such a face as you have worn for the last fortnight."

Three days later Marie returned from St. Pascal, and M'sieur Decelles' interest in fishing abated for the time being. His visits became an accepted event at the big house, and a subject for good-natured comment on the part of the villagers.

Before November had drawn its chilling hand across the valley, George Decelles and Marie Laporte had been declared man and wife by M'sieur le Curé, and Marie had left Ste. Marguerite to reside at Point Levis, where M'sieur Decelles lived with an old aunt, his only surviving relative.

Previous to their departure, however, one solemn ceremony was not neglected. The old Cross upon the hillside witnessed a sight which had occurred only twice hitherto in its history; first, when David Laporte had left home for the Seminary, and later when Angelique travelled far afield with her farmer husband. Before the final good-byes were said, the family gathered about the shrine, and there M'sieur Laporte, with raised hand, solemnly invoked the blessing of heaven upon these two young people; upon their life together, and upon those who should come after them. Sternly he bade them to remember, in all things, the will of the "bon Dieu", to neglect no obedience of the Church, and to see that neither failed in love nor duty towards the other.

After Marie's departure, life in the yellow

house began to change almost imperceptibly. An air of loneliness crept into the rooms, although Madame Laporte's stout, bustling figure came and went, with increased energy, now that there was one less to assist in the cares of housework. But that one had left a vacancy not easily filled. Even Onesime noticed it through the long evenings, or at meal times, when he relaxed for half an hour from the day's toil.

"I miss Marie," he would remark to his wife. "Ah! Marianne, you and I are growing old."

Sometimes she would take no notice, at others she would reply brusquely—"He might speak for himself, as to age—for her part she felt as young as ever! If he missed Marie so much, he had better go and stay with her."

It was hard for them both—Marie was their youngest; "la plus chère des enfants". From their sons they had little comfort. Philippe's ways were becoming more idle and more uncertain than ever; whilst Joseph was a dull, hard-working fellow, utterly unsociable, whose besetting fault was avarice.

So the months drifted past; when they had

numbered eighteen since the wedding day, Onesime was called upon a journey. He brought back with him Marie, widowed at a cruel and untimely moment. George Decelles had been killed, whilst engaged upon construction work, by an accidental explosion of dynamite. Two months later, a new life drew breath in one of the upper rooms of the big yellow house, a life so frail, so delicate, that each moment seemed about to confide it into the keeping of the Silent Messenger, who had already laid claim to that of the young mother.

These were dark days for Onesime and his wife.

CHAPTER III

Lucille

THE child was christened Lucille, after George Decelles' mother, in response to Marie's last wishes. The name was too fanciful to please Onesime—but Marie had decided on it long ago, should the baby be a girl.

After the first few months of anxiety the little creature began to thrive. Quite suddenly she commenced to gain in weight, a tint of pink crept into the puny cheeks and she began to take notice of the objects about her. By next mid-summer, when the grass was green over Marie Decelles' grave in the little church-yard, her baby was as normal and healthy an infant as any in the parish. Madame Laporte's delight in the child knew no bounds, while Onesime's fondness for his tiny granddaughter was even more pathetic. Marie's death had been an overwhelming shock to them both, but this precious legacy seemed

destined to fill the empty space left in their sad old hearts. And it was well for the unconscious Lucille that she had such fond guardians in her grandparents, for both her uncles were sorely opposed to her unlooked-for presence in the household. Joseph, because he foresaw in her entry into their home, a possible source of deflection for a portion of the family income; Philippe, because he disliked children, and considered a child's presence in the house an interference with his personal comfort. Onesime took no notice of the opinions of either.

By the time Lucille was able to walk she had become the idol of her grandparents. On summer evenings she would toddle about the garden clinging to Madame Laporte's skirts, as the latter snipped the gay flowers which it was Onesime's custom to place, when his day's work was ended, before the hillside cross. Occasionally, his wife accompanied him on his journey up the hill, but the years were beginning to tell even upon Madame Laporte's hardy frame and more often he went alone with Lucille. Holding her within the fold of his arm, her own clinging tightly about his

neck, her little curly head resting against his shoulder, he would trudge up the big hill, not so firmly nor with such long strides as five years earlier when Marie walked by his side, but bravely yet, and without much show of age. Yet age was there, a grey shadow, close behind him.

He spent a longer time on the hillside now, before making the return journey. Seated near the cross, Lucille playing in the grass by his side, he pondered many things as his eye rested on the valley and marked the results of his own labour. He would sit puffing at his pipe a long half-hour, contemplating the scene with a kind of stern pride, wholly free from the weaker attribute of vanity. Lucille toddling up, with her hands full of wild flowers, would interrupt his meditation by endeavouring to thrust her nosegay into the bulging pockets of his jacket; or, brushing his neck with some wisps of timothy, would insist upon receiving the attention she looked upon as her right.

But destiny decreed that Lucille should not grow up in the atmosphere of affection which made her baby days beautiful. When she was

"Flowers for the Cross."

six years old, Joseph Laporte took to himself a wife, and left the paternal roof, for that of the grey house close by, with its black and white signboard, bearing the words "Poste Office" over the front door, and where Madame Joseph Laporte presided until her husband's death fourteen years later. She was a fine-looking woman, of a type up to that time, unknown in Ste. Marguerite, yet common enough in all large centres. With Onesime and his wife she found small favour. Indeed the old man would have forbidden the marriage, had the Curé not pointed out to him, that Joseph, at the age of thirty-five, was clearly his own master, and that any such proceedings would be worse than useless—the forerunner of endless strife and family dissension.

Yet sooner or later, dissension was bound to follow Madame Joseph's arrival in Ste. Marguerite. Old Madame Laporte realized this perhaps better than her husband, when on her death-bed, the next year, she begged Onesime to beware of Joseph's wife, and see that she was allowed no footing in the household. But warning could not avert what she had feared.

A year after Madame Laporte's death her daughter-in-law reigned in the big yellow house, subduing the failing energies of Onesime to her own purposes and those of his sons. Twenty years later saw the result of those purposes accomplished—the last of the Laportes left St. Marguerite, never again to re-enter its friendly borders.

CHAPTER IV

Madame Dufresne Talks

AT the time when the two strangers encountered Pierre Larrebais on the hillside, Alphonse Dufresne had been in possession of the old Laporte house for five years. His wife belonged to an older branch of the Laporte family, settled near Three Rivers. He himself had farmed successfully in the County of Kamouraska, but when, two years after Madame Joseph Laporte's hasty departure from Ste. Marguerite, the new Curé of that parish wrote informing him of her death, and stating that the Laporte property was now for sale, Alphonse had negotiated a good bargain, and he and his wife became residents of Ste. Marguerite.

They had no children, a disappointment which at times threatened to make Madame's life a misery both to herself and her husband. She could never forget that she had been Mademoiselle Therèse Laporte of Three Rivers.

She had always fancied herself at the head of an establishment—a family, two or three servants, the excitement of city occupations. It was, therefore, much to her credit that she had married Alphonse for no other reason than that dictated by a very genuine affection.

Life at Ste. Marguerite suited her. The village was growing, though slowly, and since the old Laporte house was too large for her husband and herself, they opened it upon occasion, to admit, as boarders, the few sportsmen who frequented the neighbourhood for fish or game.

This evening, Madame Dufresne was superintending preparations for supper in the big kitchen, when the sound of voices conversing with her husband in the garden, announced that her guests had returned from their evening ramble.

"Hurry, Antoinette," she exclaimed, to her rather stupid-looking servant girl; "the gentlemen are here. See, do not hold the dish that way, you will drop it. There, put it on the table, and I will call them."

She stepped on to the verandah, bowing and smiling—in the old days at Three Rivers her

manner had been termed "accomplished" and she invariably associated herself with the word. She was of middle height, with a figure verging upon rotundity; neither tall enough, nor sufficiently large to suit the exaggerated check of her brown and white gingham dress. She wore an elaborate lace jabot, fastened with a huge silver brooch at her neck. The hem of her brown holland apron was embroidered with a bright design in scarlet linen. Her hair, dressed stiffly, over a high cushion, was arranged in a tightly twisted knot upon the top of her head, adding to the length of her thin and somewhat sallow face.

"Supper is ready, gentlemen," she called. Madame minced her words slightly, gesticulating frequently as she spoke.

"I hope you enjoyed your walk. Will you not step in?"

They entered by the front door, Monsieur Dufresne accompanying them to the threshold, where he left them in his wife's charge and returned once again to the garden, feeling, as usual, not a little proud of his helpmate's deportment.

Madame's guests were hungry, and once

seated before a sizzling omelet, less material considerations vanished, and it was not till their hostess made her appearance with the coffee pot and a round, homemade cheese, that they gave a thought to their conversation of an hour ago on the hill side. Then Monsieur George Gaspard looked up suddenly, as Madame arranged the coffee cups.

"Do you know a little lame boy, who lives up on the hill, Madame, near an old cross?"

"Oh, yes, I know him." She regarded her visitors attentively to detect if possible how far their acquaintanceship with Pierre might already have carried them. She had taken a liking to these two young men, especially Monsieur Gaspard; but, even so, there was no need to reveal the relationship between the child and herself.

"He's a queer little fellow. Is he one of a large family?"

"The only one."

"And lame—that's too bad."

"Bah! there was nothing else to expect, Messieurs, when all was said and done."

"Why not?"

"Oh, it is a long story, too long to tell now,

but this evening, later, perhaps, if Monsieur wishes—" Madame was seldom disinclined for a good gossip.

"He told us that old Cross belonged to God; he seemed quite surprised at our asking."

Madame started. "To God! If he had said to the devil, it would have been more true."

"Why?"

"Because it belongs to his father, Jules Larrebais. He killed his wife; it is his fault that Pierre is lame. But what will you?" She shrugged her shoulders. "Lucille Decelles was always a fool." With which remark she disappeared into the kitchen.

That evening when twilight had deepened into darkness, Pierre Larrebais, coming down to the big house as usual for his few scraps of supper, paused suddenly just inside the garden, to listen. His cousin, Madame Dufresne, was talking about him; he had heard his name mentioned distinctly as he entered. Like all children, Pierre was curious, and owing perhaps to his deformity, he was abnormally sensitive. He was alone this evening, Bijou being invariably left behind when he visited his cousin, out of deference to Mouche, Mon-

sieur Dufresne's black dog. He crept close to the side of the house, therefore, and waited. Madame was seated upon the front verandah, her husband and the two strangers beside her, the men puffing at their pipes, Madame thoroughly engrossed with her narrative.

Like many verandahs built by the Habitants, that of the old Laporte house had neither railing above nor lattice beneath. Pierre took advantage of this peculiarity to crawl underneath and proceed noiselessly on all fours to the spot directly beneath where the Dufresnes and their guests were seated. Here he curled himself up close to the front steps and waited, every sense alert. This concerned him more than he guessed.

"Yes, Messieurs," Madame Dufresne was saying, "Pierre has a curious look of his great-grandfather, even I can see that, and I only saw the old man twice in my life. Mon Dieu! that was a bad day for Onesime Laporte when his wife died, and a worse one for that poor child, Lucille. It is my belief she would never have married Larrebais had it not been for Joseph Laporte's wife."

Here her husband interrupted, and Madame,

whose thoughts had drifted for a moment, was brought back to her narrative.

"Yes, Alphonse, you are right, my thoughts run away with me. Pardon Messieurs, I will continue. Well, after Madame Onesime's death, Joseph Laporte brought his wife to live in this house, and look after the old man, who was failing fast. Before that they had lived in the grey house over there, which used to be the Post Office. It is quite empty now, though Madame Joseph was post mistress until she left Ste. Marguerite. It was easy to see what that woman was like; the old Curé had known it from the first time he caught sight of her. She had no children of her own and she hated the little girl Lucille. Both she and Joseph were jealous of the child, the more so because old M'sieur Laporte was devoted to her."

"It was a curious household that, for Philippe Laporte lived there, no better than a vagabond. The months passed, and poor little Lucille was more and more neglected, and her temper quite spoiled. She was always made to appear naughty before her grandfather, and was ill-used behind his back by her

uncles and Madame Joseph. The Curé saw very well what was going on, and he spoke to Onesime once or twice, but by that time the old man was completely in the hands of his daughter-in-law."

"When Lucille was eight years old, Madame Joseph persuaded M'sieur Laporte to send her to the Convent at Grand Falls, and there she was kept until she was fifteen, Madame Joseph taking good care that she came home as seldom as possible. Indeed, the child did not want to come, for at home her life was made miserable, and she believed that her grandfather had ceased to love her. Madame Joseph had it in mind that Lucille would become a nun, and be well out of the way when it came to a division of the old man's property."

Madame Dufresne paused here a moment to collect the thread of her narrative, and from somewhere close by there came a low shuffling sound, which made her husband exclaim testily:—

"Couche-toi, Mouche—marche à la maison," and then apologetically to his guests—"That is my little black dog, Messieurs, he is always in the flower beds hunting something."

It was pitch dark now, and Pierre had taken advantage of the fact to creep nearer to the group. Madame began again—

"Meanwhile, Messieurs, as you will see for yourselves, M'sieur Laporte's affairs had not been going very well, which was to be expected, with no others to manage them than that worthless Philippe, and Joseph who was no better than a dolt. There had been trouble in the lumber camps for some winters, so that fewer logs came down to the mill, and the output was reduced by half. Then also many of the people ceased to bring their milk to the creamery, saying that Philippe cheated them. Onesime was growing too frail to attend to any business, and when he tried to inquire into his affairs, his sons would always put him off so that he could not know the truth. He was very much in his bed now, and Madame Joseph could not do enough for him, for she always had both eyes on the property. When the fine days came in the summer time, the old man used to get up and work a little in the garden, or walk down the village leaning on his stick.

"It is a very curious thing, Messieurs, is it

not, how big things will grow out of little ones. They said one day when Onesime was standing near the bridge, and looking up at his fields towards the old cross on the hill, that M'sieur le Curé passed and stopped for a few moments to speak to him. That was the old Curé M'sieur Tetrault, the first parish priest of Ste. Marguerite. He loved Onesime like a brother, they said, but of late there had come a coldness between them, for M'sieur le Curé was annoyed over the way Lucille was treated.

" 'Bonjour, Onesime,' " he said, " 'I see you are looking at the old cross. It is time someone looked at it, Onesime—it does not do to neglect le bon Dieu.'

"Onesime grew red in the face: 'I do not understand you, M'sieur le Curé, he said. 'We are both growing old men, and these legs of mine will not take me up the big hill, but my daughter-in-law has never neglected her duty to le bon Dieu, nor to the parish.'

"At this M'sieur le Curé looked very hard at Onesime. I have had the whole story, Messieurs, many times from Denis Camuel; he lives on the Fourth Concession now, but he

was fishing that afternoon beside the bushes quite close to the bridge, and heard and saw everything 'She tells you that, does she Onesime?' says M'sieur le Curé. 'Why do you not make Philippe put the horse in the buckboard and take you up there to see for yourself? Believe me, the weeds have not been cut for three summers. Ah, my friend, look to your affairs. Where is little Lucille who used to love you? You have taken strangers into your house. Those who neglect God cannot expect blessings at his hand.'

"Then M'sieur le Curé passed on, and Denis Camuel said that Onesime looked as if someone had struck him a blow—he held on to the side of the bridge, and his whole face twitched. Denis thought it was no wonder, since Onesime knew very well what all the village believed, that if anything happened to the old cross it would mean bad luck for the Laportes. Myself, I think Onesime did not care so much for that as to think that he had neglected his duty, for he was a very strict man.

"There was a great row in the Laporte house that evening; the rumour of it spread all through the village. Afterwards, Onesime

was very ill in bed for a week, but ten days later Lucille Decelles came back from the Convent, and never was a girl more unwelcome in her home.

"At first it did not matter so much to Lucille, because her grandfather was so glad to have her, and it seemed as if he loved her again better than ever. It was her duty to look after the cross, and now very soon all was in order again, and the people could go up there to their prayers with some pleasure. Every evening Lucille would take up her basket of flowers. She was pretty—Pierre has her eyes, although he is very like Onesime. All the boys were crazy about Lucille, for she was not like any of the other girls in the village. But just the same, she was a fool, Messieurs, as you will soon see."

Madame stopped for a few minutes to rest. "It is a long story, Messieurs. Do I weary you?" she enquired.

"On the contrary, Madame," M. Gaspard reassured her, and Pierre, seated beneath the gallery, dug his bare toes into the soft earth, and waited impatiently for her to proceed.

CHAPTER V

The Will

IT was Monsieur Gaspard who next spoke. "I think if you ask me, Madame, Lucille Decelles had a hard time. It is scarcely fair to judge her."

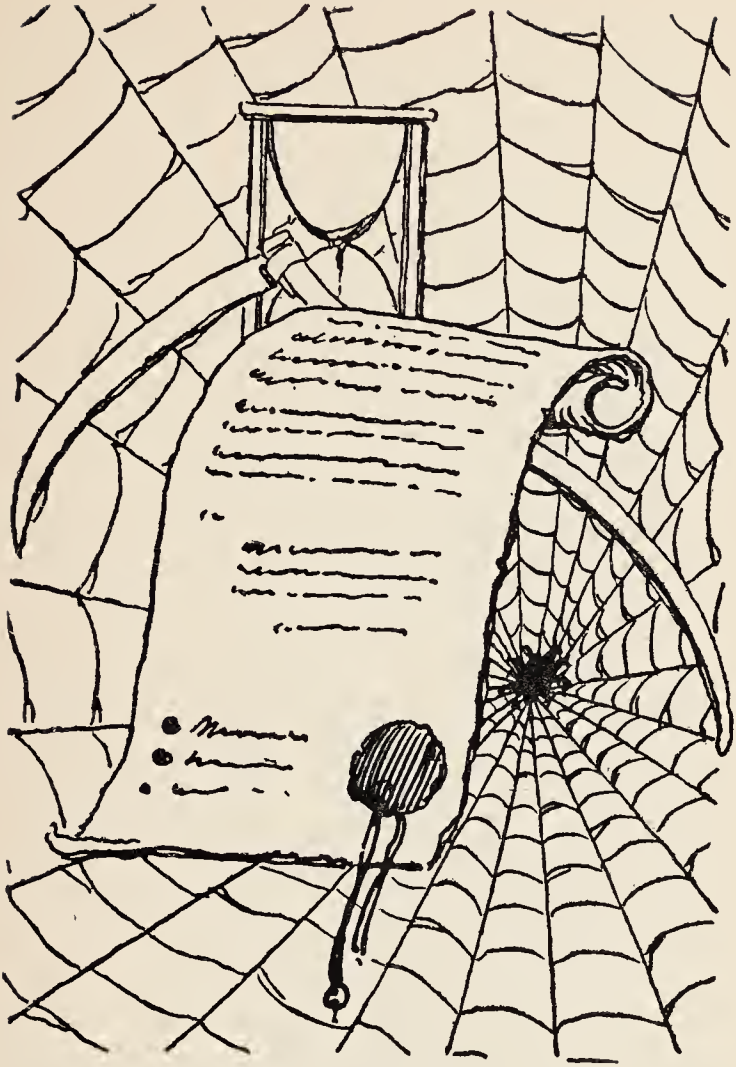
Pierre started. This was a strange point of view. For years he had been accustomed to hear his mother decried as a fool and an ingrate, without any particular knowledge of her history. This was a new idea, destined to bear fruit in the boy's mind.

"Perhaps, Monsieur," Madame Dufresne answered, "but then the world is a hard place for most people. Well, for a little while things seemed to go smoothly, but the evil was too deep and Madame Joseph was never idle. That autumn Jules Larrebais made his first appearance in the village. He came from Rivière-du-Loup, and was, though much younger, a friend of Philippe Laporte. He was constantly hanging around the Laporte

house and it was said in the village that Philippe owed him money for some business in Rivière-du-Loup.

"I suppose you did not see Larrebais this evening? No matter, he is not the same now, as he was in those days. He drinks, Messieurs —he drank then, but you would not have thought it, had you seen him escorting Lucille Decelles to Church on Sundays. The old Curé was the only one who did not like Jules, and he warned Lucille against him; but they said that by that time things were going very badly again in the Laporte household, and that Madame Joseph had set old Onesime against his granddaughter worse than before. There was much quarrelling, and Philippe Laporte drank very hard, and Lucille would often walk down the village, her cheeks and eyes all swollen and red from crying. M'sieur le Curé tried to help her, but she was angry with him for speaking against Jules, and would not listen.

"Denis Camuel said it must have been about the end of November, that autumn, when one day, M'sieur le Curé got letters from Rivière-du-Loup telling him some very bad things



"Onesime had never made a will."

about Jules Larrebais, and M'sieur was so angry that he went straight to the big house that evening, when they were all together after supper, and denounced Jules before everyone. There was a great scene, Jules swore that everything was false, but Onesime was very angry—he believed M'sieur le Curé, and Madame Joseph supported him, and said that Jules must leave the house at once. The Curé went further, and said that he must leave the village. Only Joseph and Philippe spoke for him. In the end Jules became very excited and said he would leave next day, but they would be sorry some day for the way they had treated him.

"Sure enough, the next day Jules disappeared from the village and no one knew where he had gone, but the following morning when Madame Joseph looked into Lucille's room it was empty—she had gone too. There was a little note for her grandfather, saying that she and Jules were to be married that morning at Rivière-du-Loup. When the news spread around the village, M'sieur le Curé hurried to the house and all the people stood about the doors of their houses talking, for

every one made sure that this would kill Onesime. M'sieur le Curé found him in the kitchen smoking his pipe; only Madame Joseph was there, for Philippe and his brother had gone to work as though nothing had happened. Onesime was very distant with M'sieur le Curé, and when he tried to speak of Lucille told him that he had no longer any granddaughter, and that he would never see her again, for she had disgraced them all. Then M'sieur le Curé came out of the house with tears in his eyes, and his hand shaking, for he saw that Onesime was more completely changed than even he had imagined.

"M'sieur le Curé took the train for Rivière-du-Loup that same afternoon, but could find no trace of Jules or Lucille, and it was not until five months later that anything was heard of them. One day in May, however, Jules arrived by train in the village, bringing Lucille with him, and went straight to M'sieur le Curé. He showed him their marriage certificate and told him that he had decided to settle in Ste. Marguerite, and meant to build himself a house, and that the Laportes owed him money and he meant to collect it. M'sieur

did not know what to do, but when he looked at Lucille and saw how ill she seemed, and how badly Jules must have treated her, he decided that they had better stay, though for some days there was great talk in the village. But after all, what could one do?

"Lucille did not dare to go near her grandfather, but kept herself hidden away in a house, at the other end of the village; but Jules induced Philippe Laporte to sell him a piece of land that Philippe had bought for himself some years before, adjoining Onesime's property, and close to the old cross. He put up that tiny house you saw this evening, and where he still lives with Pierre. The house was finished about the end of August, and Jules and his wife moved into it. He had been much away from Ste. Marguerite, and whenever he was there, drank so hard that he was a scandal to the whole parish, but the way he treated his wife was worse than all. Still, no one ever heard her complain. He saw much of Philippe Laporte, and often they would go away together.

"Lucille was expecting her baby in October, but it was said she would never live to

see it. After they moved into the new house Larrebais stayed more at home, and it seemed as if there was some quarrel between him and Philippe Laporte—they did not see so much of one another, and when they did, Denis said that Philippe seemed to be afraid of Jules. Joseph also avoided him. I can tell you, Messieurs, in those days before his brains grew all fuddled, Larrebais was a clever man. He knew how to wait.

"About the middle of September, old Onesime Laporte suddenly became very ill, so much worse than he had ever been, that they were obliged to send to St. Pascal for the doctor. When he saw Onesime he told him that he could not expect to live many more weeks, and that he must prepare for the end. You will find it a very funny thing, Messieurs, that all this time Onesime had never made a will. Alphonse and I have often discussed this, and found it very curious. But after the doctor had seen him, he sent word to M. Guy, the notary at St. Eustache, to come down the next afternoon and they would attend to this business. There was much excitement in the village that evening, but no one saw either

Philippe or Joseph about the store, which was thought strange. One man said he had met Jules Larrebais on the road to M'sieur le Curé's, and Jules had laughed and said—'Old man Laporte won't leave all he has to those sons of his. Sapré, non!'

"My husband and I were living at that time in Kamouraska, and it was a strange thing, Messieurs, that we had planned that week to make a visit to some friends at St. Eustache. We arrived there the same evening that the message came from Onesime for M. Guy, the notary, to go down to Ste. Marguerite. Then Alphonse and I consulted together, and we decided that it was our duty to go down there too, and ask for the old man, and see what we could do."

Madame Dufresne paused.

"Your visit was fortunate, Madame," Monsieur Gaspard exclaimed.

"You may say so, M'sieur, but, Mon Dieu, will I ever forget that day? You remember that day well, Alphonse, eh!"

Her husband assented. "There are some things one would not forget, Messieurs, if one lived to be two hundred years old." He with-

drew the short pipe from his mouth, and spoke with conviction.

His wife took up the narrative.

"We arrived here, Messieurs, about two o'clock in the afternoon, and drove straight to Onesime's house. Mon Dieu, I can see it to-night as it was then. It was painted yellow; we changed the colour to green when we bought it, for I could not bear anything that reminded me of that afternoon. It was very warm weather for September, and both the front windows and the front door were open. It had been very dry, too, and I can remember my black silk dress was covered with dust so that I was ashamed to go in. Madame Joseph came to the door and scowled when she saw us.

" 'Bonjour, Madame Joseph Laporte,' I said, 'we have come to ask for my Uncle, Monsieur Laporte. We hear he is ill.'

" 'He is too ill to see anyone,' she said.

" 'I am sorry,' I answered, 'but in that case we shall wait and see my cousins, Joseph and Philippe,' and I pushed past her into the house and sat down in the parlour. She was so angry she could not speak, but followed us

in and took a chair opposite to me. But I had taken good care, Messieurs, to take a chair close by the door where I could see straight into Onesime's room across the passage —from where she sat she could see nothing at all. The doors of the room stood wide open to give Onesime air, and when I caught sight of him, I got a great fright, for I thought he had gone for sure; he looked so ill. They had propped him up in the big wooden arm-chair. He was dressed in a pair of old black trousers, and a white shirt; his head lay back on the pillows, and his eyes were shut. His arms hung down at the sides of the chair, and his mouth was open—his hair and beard had turned quite white. I caught Alphonse by the hand; for a few minutes I thought Onesime was dead.

"There was a table drawn up close to his chair, and on it some papers and two big books. Monsieur Preneuf, the doctor from St. Pascal, was there, and M. Guy, the notary. Philippe stood with his back to the window and Joseph was behind Onesime's chair. They were waiting for M'sieur le Curé, and in a few minutes he came in. When Onesime

heard him, he opened his eyes and nodded to him. Then M'sieur le Curé gave the blessing, and afterwards came and stood beside Onesime's chair. You remember, Alphonse, it was then I whispered to you that there was something wrong.

" 'My poor friend,' said M'sieur le Curé, and then stopped suddenly, as if he could not say any more, and his lips were trembling.

"M. Guy came forward and opened the books, and M'sieur le Curé drew a chair up to the table. But before they went any further, Onesime held up his hand, and after M'sieur le Docteur had given him some brandy, he turned to M'sieur le Curé and said—

" 'M'sieur le Curé, we are old friends; we have journeyed the same road for forty years. You have known Onesime Laporte in his good days and in his bad days, and you have given him good counsel—le bon Dieu will reward you. There is not much further to travel, and I sent for you this last time that I might have your advice and the blessings of le bon Dieu upon what I do. It is my intention—'

"Here, Messieurs, I looked at Madame Joseph, and I can tell you it was something to watch her face; she sat listening with all her ears, but she was ashamed to move any closer to the door, so she was obliged to swallow her anger. When Onesime began to speak to the Curé, I thought Madame Joseph would burst.

" 'It is my intention, M'sieur le Curé,' he said, 'to leave the creamery to my son Philippe; to Joseph goes the mill and this house; and to Madame Joseph Laporte I leave the farm and other property. She has been a good daughter to me when those of my own family cared nothing for my old age.'

"Mon Dieu, we did not like to hear that, and even Alphonse here grew red in the face; as for Madame Joseph, I think the devil must look that way, when he has just carried off a soul, eh, Alphonse?" Madame stopped dramatically.

"What next, Madame? Surely Madame Joseph did not have it all her own way?" demanded her listeners.

Madame shook her head—in a minute or two she resumed. "Then Onesime told the Curé, that the old Cross would not go to

Madame Joseph with the rest of the property, but would be left to the parish, and that he would leave a sum of money with the Curé to be used in the care of it. When he had said all this he was very weak, and stopped to take some more brandy.

"They all waited for Monsieur le Curé to speak, but he was quite silent. Once or twice he opened his lips, and then closed them again as if he could not find words—Onesime looked at him. At last he said—

" 'You know then how your affairs stand, Onesime?'

"Old M'sieur Laporte looked at his sons—'They have managed the business now for six years—this afternoon we will see.'

"When I heard that, I thought to myself, 'We will see, indeed.' And I looked well at Joseph Laporte—his face was like a fish. But, Messieurs, there was no need even to open the books, for at that moment Jules Larrebais entered the house. I had never seen him before, and I wondered who he was. Madame Joseph could not see him from where she sat. He had some papers in his hand, and he went straight into Onesime's room.

" 'Pardon, M'sieur Laporte,' he said—'but I do not think you will leave all that property to your family. Half of it is mine, and I will take the old Cross for luck.'

"When Onesime saw Larrebais, he glared at him like a savage, but when Jules said that about the property, the old man thought he was mad. He would have spoken, but M'sieur le Curé stood up suddenly and looked at those men, and I knew then that Larrebais was right. It took him just ten minutes with the help of those papers to show them what he wanted. They were signed by Philippe and Joseph—a mortgage on the farm and there was no money to pay. Mon Dieu, Messieurs, I cannot tell you the scene in that room! When Madame Joseph heard Jules' voice, she jumped up from her chair and pushed past me to the door. She would have entered the room, but the Curé prevented her—there was enough confusion already. When she heard what Larrebais said, I thought she would kill them all. She turned and ran into the kitchen talking to herself like a fool. 'That is one for her,' I said to Alphonse, 'and I am not sorry. But it will kill Onesime.' Which it

did, Messieurs, but not in the way we thought; for just then, there was a cry outside as though someone was hurt, and the garden gate opened with a click, and a woman came running up the path into the house. It was Jules' wife, Lucille, and she was in Onesime's room, before anyone could stop her. Alphonse and I jumped up then to see what would happen.

"Larrebais was standing near the table; Lucille pushed him to one side—'Jules, Jules, what have you done! You will kill him! Mon grandpère, mon pauvre grandpère!' She would have thrown herself on the ground beside Onesime's chair, but when the old man saw her he drew back, and the anger in his eyes was so dreadful that poor Lucille gave a little cry and turned away. He had not stood on his feet for weeks, Messieurs—imagine! Now he drew himself up, and stood with one hand holding the table. I tell you, Messieurs, I will never forget that sight. Twice he tried to speak, the second time he said Lucille's name, but could get no further. M'sieur le Curé touched his arm, but he took no notice. Lucille covered her face with her hands, and

stood trembling—Jules did not move. Then Onesime found his voice.

" 'Lucille Decelles,' he said, 'you have broken my heart—you have brought shame upon my family! You were cursed from the beginning! How dare you enter this house? Go, I tell you—go, before I strike you down. May God forget you and your child forever!'

" 'Silence, Onesime,' cried M'sieur le Curé, and I had never seen a man look so stern—'for shame. See what you have done.'

"Lucille had gone white in the face, Messieurs, and now she began to moan. I caught her myself as she fell. Alphonse carried her out of the room, and I went with him, and that was the last time I saw Onesime Laporte alive. He had fallen back into his chair, and lay gasping, with his eyes shut. M'sieur le Curé leant over him and M'sieur le Docteur had opened his shirt at the neck. That was the last I saw. Pierre was born twelve hours later, but Lucille knew nothing. She died at mid-night. Early next morning old M'sieur Laporte died too—they were buried the same day in the cemetery over there." Madame stopped speaking.

"And did Larrebais get the property?" one of the men asked—"and what became of Madame Joseph?"

"Jules got what he wanted, Messieurs, the property on the hillside, which was the best part of the farm, and the old cross. In less than three months he had sold the whole thing and spent the money in drink. Then for a long time he disappeared. But the plot with the old cross he would not sell—he kept it to spite the parish—he has it still. M'sieur le Curé had given little Pierre to Madame Perrault to nurse, and she kept him until he was four years old; by that time the old Curé was dead, and when Jules came back to the parish he took the boy himself."

"And the Joseph Laportes, what about them and Philippe?"

"Bien, Messieurs, what could you expect? Le bon Dieu cannot put up with such people for long. After Onesime's death they lived on in the old house for a year; but Joseph and Philippe took to quarrelling, and Madame Joseph got a bad name in the village. One morning Joseph Laporte was found drowned down there in the mill-stream. People said it

was suicide, but they proved nothing; only it was a funny thing, Messieurs, that they buried him in the cemetery. Philippe was killed in an accident on the railway a month later—people found that strange, Messieurs. Madame Laporte lived on here for a few months, by herself, but her ways did not suit the village. By-and-by, the Curé told her she had better go, and quite suddenly she disappeared. She left the house as it was, but took all the money, and no one heard of her again until three years later, when some priest wrote to tell the Curé that she was dead. Then the farm was put up for sale. M'sieur le Curé wrote to Alphonse, and we decided to buy the place, Messieurs, and open the creamery and the mill, which had been closed down. We have been here five years now. It is not a bad place to live, but a little too quiet. For my part I prefer the city."

"And what about Pierre?" Monsieur Gaspard questioned.

"Pierre—Oh, M'sieur saw him this evening, of course! Bien! You see what he is —a little savage who knows nothing. He comes down here every evening for his supper—it is

funny we have not seen him to-night; perhaps he is in the kitchen with Antoinette. M'sieur le Curé will try to get him to school this winter, but mon Dieu, that boy will come to no good. Jules Larrebais can teach him nothing. He is a queer child; I do not understand him." Madame spoke with an air of finalty, as having mentioned the worst feature in her category of Pierre's faults. After a pause she added reflectively:—

"But you know, Messieurs, it has always been said in the village that Onesime's misfortune began when the old cross was first neglected. You did not think it had such a history. But I have talked too much. You will be weary.

Long after the last candle had been extinguished in the Dufresne house, Pierre lay quietly beneath the gallery. His mind was very busy; of all that he had heard, one fact impressed him most; he kept repeating this to himself—

"It does not belong to le bon Dieu, it belongs to Jules Larrebais; it is ours then—le bon Dieu has nothing to do with it."

Presently, Mouche, the black dog, prowling amongst the flower beds, scented the boy out and lay down beside him. With his arms around the animal's neck, Pierre fell asleep.

PART TWO

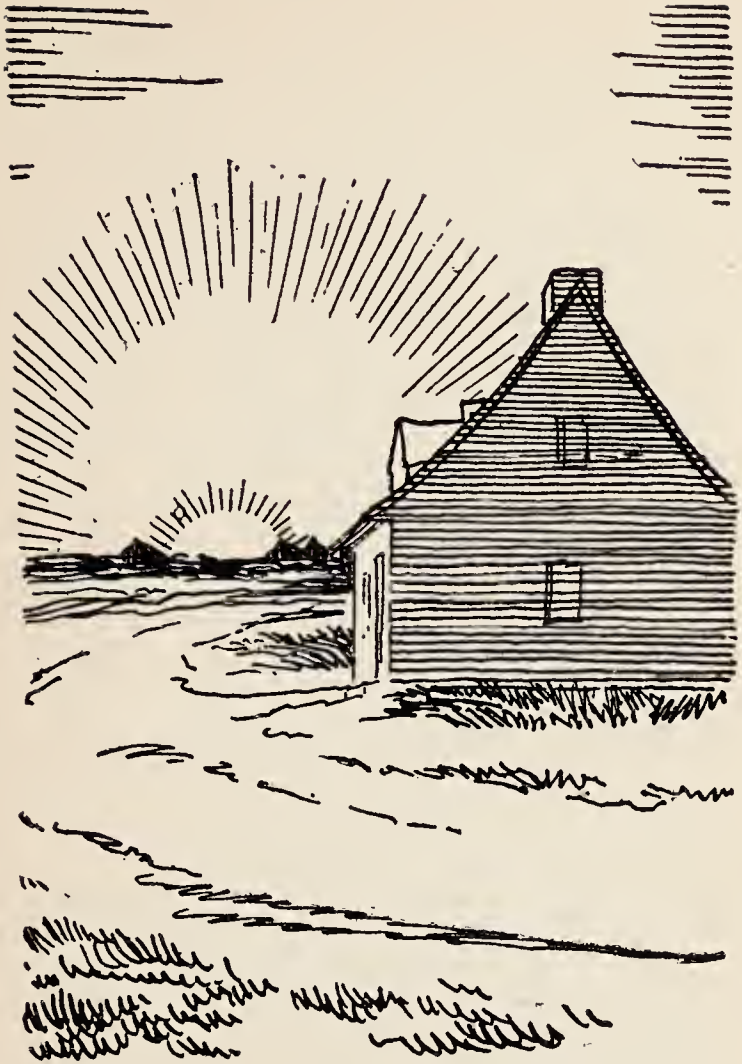
CHAPTER I

"To Jules Larrebais"

MADAME DUFRESNE was astir early. Her guests wished to start for the lakes before the heat of an August sun should make the journey wearisome. Pierre was earlier still—sunrise saw him limping up the big hill in the direction of home. He had had nothing to eat since the previous noon, and he wondered now whether he should find any food in the house or if his father would thrust him out as he had done yesterday.

The morning was at its best—new-born and radiant. Birds piped from the roadside ditches; officious wag-tails, perched fearlessly on fence rails, watched Pierre as he passed. A soft breeze stirred the bracken and goldenrod, even the staid joe-pye weed swayed to and fro, surrendering itself to the gladness of the hour. Fields and woods rejoiced, alike, in their bath of dew and sunlight.

A strange excitement, altogether new, and not unpleasing, stirred in Pierre's breast this morning. From time to time his glance sought the direction of the old cross, as he toiled upwards. At first, only the top and arms were visible; then, little by little, it grew into his horizon, until the sun, striking upon the glass of the little shrine, sent its reflected rays dazzling into his eyes, as he reached the hill top. He stopped, and with a sigh of relief gazed at the cross; all was the same as it had been yesterday, only with this difference—the cross belonged to Jules Larrebais. Never had Pierre regarded it with so much interest. He sat down by the roadside opposite, and for a long time kept his eyes fixed upon it, trying to recall and understand all that he had heard the night before. He had missed the first part of his cousin's narrative, but he knew by tradition that Onesime Laporte had given the cross to God; he knew, also, that Onesime was in some way connected with his own misfortunes. Last night he had learned much—more than he could comprehend—but he understood clearly now that Onesime must have loved the cross, for was he not distressed when



The Home of Jules Larrebais.

told that it had been neglected? His mother, too, had cared for it, and Onesime had once loved his mother. Until last night, he had scarcely known anything about her beyond the evil talk which he had heard from the villagers. Now he knew that she had been unhappy. Sudden anger leapt up within him at Onesime and at those others who had made her suffer. Many questions passed through Pierre's mind; he knew little about mothers—the good Madame Perrault, who had fostered him, had too many children of her own to waste special attention upon Pierre. But he remembered when Clement Anjou, the blacksmith's son was ill, how carefully Madame Anjou had nursed him. To be cared for in that way must be good. His own mother had been pretty—did that mean she was like the Mother in the Shrine? Pierre wondered—he got up and limped over to investigate. The glass was still intact, but the dust and rain of many summers had left their stains upon it. Within, stood a statue of the Madonna, lilies and green grasses clustering about her feet, but hot suns had changed the once clear colour of her robe to a pallid hue, whilst the garments

of the Christ Child had faded to a sickly shade of yellow. Pierre squeezed through a hole in the paling and, drawing near the cross, gazed into the shrine. The glass was dusty; carefully he drew his shirt-sleeve across it. Ah, that was much better—he could see plainly now. The Mother in the shrine had long golden hair which fell back over her shoulders, and to Pierre she seemed beautiful; the little Jesus, too, was plump and pretty. Wistfully, the boy turned away; he would have liked very much to know if his mother had been as lovely as this one. When he had squeezed himself back through the fence again, he stooped down, and picking up two broken palings, placed them against the opening. As he did so, the sound of wheels warned him of an approaching buckboard. Stretching himself out flat, amidst the long grass, he waited, hidden by the intervening fence rails. He felt ashamed of his new impulses. When the vehicle had passed, he jumped up angrily, kicked the palings out of place again, and turned his steps towards the house. The door was half open. Peeping in, Pierre, to his relief, found the room empty, save for Bijou,

sleeping in a corner. Seizing upon the remains of a loaf, which lay upon the table, he seated himself on the doorstep and began to eat greedily.

CHAPTER II

Vieux Joe's News

A WEEK later, Vieux Joe, the pedlar, brought a bit of news to the village. He had been absent for over a fortnight, plying his trade in the back Concessions. It fell to his lot to make a discovery, which any passerby might have made had he used the eyesight bestowed upon him. So much a matter of habit had it become to take the old cross and its rude, neglected state for granted, that most of the Habitants passing up and down the road had ceased to notice it.

Vieux Joe standing amidst the buckboards outside the creamery on this particular morning, prefaced his subject with a nonchalant remark—

"So Jules Larrebais has sold at last."

Denis Camuel, to whom the remark was addressed, paused in the act of lifting a big milk can from the back of his buckboard and stared at Joe vacantly—

"What has he sold?" he demanded.

"Why, the old cross."

Denis looked incredulous, then, "Vieux Joe says Jules Larrebais has sold the old cross," he called out to another farmer who had just driven up.

The news caused astonishment, but was received with the same scepticism. It spread quickly, however, only to be as quickly contradicted. Narcisse Anjou, the blacksmith, strolled across the road from his shop to join the group of farmers—

"That cannot be true," he remarked emphatically. "Jules disappeared last week. He has not been seen for ten days. I know it from Madame Dufresne—Pierre comes to her for food. Sapré, Jules will never sell that; he is too spiteful."

Vieux Joe stepped forward to defend his statement.

"Who then, will you tell me, has mended the fence-paling? How is it that the grass is cut, the shrine dusted? Who has placed flowers before the cross?"

Who indeed? They stared at Joe and shook their heads. He became the centre of inter-

est. Denis Camuel, who resided on the Fourth Concession, denied the truth of the statement. Did not he himself pass the cross four times a week on his way to and from the creamery, and how had he not noticed any difference? Had he ever looked? Bien, sure —he had eyes in his head! That meant nothing —had he ever stopped there? No, but— Good! Joe had stopped that very morning to say his prayers at the cross, and had noted these things for himself. Let those who wished go and see likewise. Monsieur Dufresne, coming to the creamery door, caught the thread of conversation, and added his word to the argument. The men listened whilst he spoke.

"It is impossible. Jules Larrebais has not sold the cross. What Narcisse says is true." Here Narcisse grunted his approval. "Larrebais was drunk as a pig last Tuesday, and since then no one has seen him."

The pedlar, shouldering his pack, turned his back upon the crowd with a contemptuous shrug. "Eh bien, say what you like, I have eyes. If it is not Jules, it may be old Onesime Laporte come back. I daresay he will find the village changed somewhat—he may not

"Vieux Joe—the pedlar."

care for our ways. Keep away from the old cross, after dark, is my advice."

He glanced back over his shoulder, and chuckled sardonically at the sight of the scared look on Narcisse Anjou's face.

"He is a queer fellow, Joe." Monsieur Dufresne scratched his head thoughtfully, as he glanced after the retreating figure.

"Sapré, did you see how he looked then?" exclaimed Narcisse.

"For my part I think there is nothing in it," continued M'sieur Dufresne. "For all we know he may have done it himself. Still, we might mention the matter to M'sieur le Curé. It can do no harm."

This suggestion was accepted the more readily, since Joe's insinuation concerning Onesime had left an uncomfortable feeling in their midst. Narcisse, being the least occupied at the moment, volunteered to go down to the Presbytery and acquaint M'sieur le Curé with the news, and even accompany him, if necessary, to the hillside on a journey of investigation.

An hour later, Philemon Lebel's store, in close proximity to the Curé's garden, was the

scene of unwonted excitement. The farmers, their business concluded at the creamery, were accustomed to seek the store for the purpose of executing the various commissions of their household. A group of them hailed Narcisse as, returning from the hillside, whither he had accompanied the Curé, he hurried up the road towards the creamery. Narcisse wished to continue on his way, especially as he caught sight of a familiar-looking pack dropped beside the doorway, and saw Joe's lean face peering from the window. But the pedlar's story had spread, and half a dozen voices challenged his tidings.

"Narcisse! Narcisse! Come here! Sapré, look at his face, he looks scared!"

"What does the Curé say, Narcisse? Have you seen the cross?"

The blacksmith hesitated for a moment, he had no intention of entering the shop. He came close to the steps, however, and the men pushed through the door to hear him.

"Mon Dieu! it is true enough," he exclaimed testily. "Someone is playing tricks with the cross. The Curé knows nothing."

"But no doubt Narcisse Anjou knows

everything." Joe had thrust himself forward. "Narcisse and Joseph Dufresne—they are very wise men. I wonder what Onesime Laporte thinks of his old house these days? Do you remember, Narcisse, how he once thrashed you for stealing his apples? Au revoir, mes braves, I must be off."

He stooped for his pack as he spoke. "The days grow shorter now, and I do not like the roads after dark."

CHAPTER III

Mystery

IT may have been the underlying note of sinister suggestion in Joe's words, which led M'sieur le Curé to take action in the matter, and on the following Sunday refer openly, in Church, to the renovation of the old shrine.

Nothing had been seen of Jules Larrebais, and the affair still remained a mystery, for whoever was concerned in it did not see fit to perform his good offices by daylight, and none of the villagers could be induced to visit the spot after nightfall, more especially as the weather latterly had been wet and stormy. It was on a Tuesday that Joe delivered his news before the creamery. By Friday, enquiry had proved futile, speculation had exhausted itself, and imagination was rapidly supplying all the details lacking in the mere suggestion of a ghostly visitant. At noon on this day, Narcisse Anjou and Denis Camuel

came near to blows in the blacksmith's shop upon the subject of a spectral Onesime. Denis scorned such a theory, reflected upon Narcisse's valour, and in the name of St. Joseph, would have him explain why, after over ten years of decent repose, Onesime should take to troubling his head again about affairs at Ste. Marguerite?

Narcisse, who found Madame Dufresne's airs and graces difficult to tolerate, and owed her no small grudge in consequence, would have it that Onesime was doubtless displeased at the vanity and pride displayed by his grandniece. He wished to teach her a lesson in humility, or, failing that, might administer some dire punishment; for his part he would not like to stand in Madame Dufresne's shoes. Besides, why had not Joseph Dufresne been up to watch the cross if he had no fear of Onesime Laporte?

Denis swore at such folly. Joseph Dufresne was too occupied with his own affairs; he had been at St. Pascal for two days past on business. For his own part, he had lived on the Fourth Concession for the last six years, and had passed the cross regularly

on his way to and from the village, and he was not afraid of Onesime nor of any ghost in the Province.

"Just the same, he never frequented the road after dark." Narcisse threw out the remark with a sneer.

"No, for by that time he was at home with his wife and children, where a good husband should be," retorted Denis. He supposed, however, that Narcisse would be up there one of these nights. Was it true, as Joe said, that Onesime had once thrashed him for stealing apples?

What might have happened at this juncture, but for the timely interference of Théophile Perrault, it is hard to say. Blows were averted, but the discussion did not end; its volubility increased; its acrimony deepened. Finally, Narcisse was goaded into action. He took a wager to visit the old cross that same evening after night-fall, and report on what went forward. No man could accuse him of cowardice.

When the news got abroad, excitement swept through the village, but no companion volunteered to accompany Narcisse upon his

"A Spectral Onesime."

expedition, and, as evening approached, the blacksmith's shop was deserted save by its owner, whose temper was not to be trusted. Shortly after dark, Théophile Perrault, who had been elected stake holder, went in search of Narcisse, to ascertain if the latter were prepared to fulfil his wager; but the blacksmith could not be found, nor any knowledge obtained as to his whereabouts. Denis, who had banished all thoughts of returning home that night, joined the loungers in Lebel's store somewhat disconcerted. Speculation ran riot, and since the matter had not yet filtered to the Curé's ears, much hard-earned money changed hands.

It was Théophile's eldest son who hurried up to the creamery next morning with the tidings that Narcisse Anjou had met Onesime at the old cross at midnight; and that the latter had hit Narcisse across the head with a fence pole, for daring to enquire into his doings. Narcisse had tried to grapple with him, but in vain, and Onesime had, moreover, pursued the unfortunate man down the hill to the village, threatening dreadful things against the whole parish.

Evidence was not lacking to bear witness to the truth of this statement. Narcisse, when interviewed, certainly bore traces of his night's adventure; his head was tightly bandaged, and indications of disfigurement were visible about his right eye. He refused to speak, however, nor was his mood encouraging to questioners.

What he had seen, he had seen. As for the wager, whoever liked might take the money; for his part, he would move from Ste. Marguerite, rather than have further dealings with the devil.

His hearers looked at each other nervously —this reticence proved more impressive than any amount of boasting. Narcisse became the hero of the hour. His tale spread like wildfire, but voices were lowered in repeating it—discussion was less than previously.

Alas! for Narcisse—at noon Madame Anjou sought the Curé in his study, and the tale she told of her husband's shortcomings set the good man thinking. As a direct result three black bottles concealed in a small cupboard behind the blacksmith's forge were confiscated by M'sieur; and on Sunday, as before stated,

he referred, after service, to the renovation of the old cross.

The Curé, Monsieur Gagnon, was a man on the far side of forty, still bearing about him much of the vigour and freshness of his youth —better educated and more refined than the type of priest that is often to be found in country parishes. He was a nephew of Monsieur Tetrault, the first parish priest of Ste. Marguerite, who had been brother, in all but name, to Onesime Laporte.

For over seven years he had administered the spiritual affairs of the community, not neglecting the advantage to be gained from shrewd judgment and an admonishing voice in the necessitous claims of matters temporal.

The congregation was taken by surprise, and yet to most of them the question of the cross had become serious enough to warrant the Curé's utterance. No disease is more contagious than superstition, when let loose amongst the ignorant. Perhaps Vieux Joe, returned from his week's round and withdrawn into an obscure corner, whence his ferret eyes followed every movement of those about him,

was the only person superior to an unpleasant thrill of emotion.

The Curé, of course, was no believer in Onesime as a psychic agent, and discarded all connection with such ideas. His appeal was based upon practical grounds.

Someone in the parish, moved, no doubt, by motives of charity, he argued, and a reverence for what had once been sacred amongst them, had taken upon himself this office—without doubt a praiseworthy and pious action, yet, owing to the circumstances of the case, one which had given rise to much discussion and foolish speculation throughout the village. This, doubtless, had not been foreseen, and it might be well, in future, for those contemplating any such acts of charity, to first seek some advice, lease they stray from the true source of charity, and be led by pride, rather than humility. The Church, who was the Mother of all true humility, and the inspirer of all acts of charity, put forward as a first requirement, obedience to her commands. There was grave danger at the present time, that what had been intended for good might result in evil. A spirit of dissension and rest-

lessness already threatened the parish. He therefore enjoined it as a strict duty upon whatever person or persons had undertaken this act of devotion, to make themselves known to him with the least possible delay. Should such person or persons desire that secrecy be observed, their wish would be respected, and the knowledge would remain with him alone. As their Curé, and for the good of the parish, he had a right to make this demand; he must be able to say here, in the Church—"My, friends, this is a good office, undertaken in the spirit of piety and devotion. I command you to respect the reticence of your benefactor. This is a gift to the parish —Receive it as such, in a spirit of humility and gratitude."

As the Curé uttered these last words, his eyes travelled over the faces of the congregation upturned to his own, to trace, if possible, in any one of them, some clue to the mystery. But, to his surprise, there appeared no sign of perturbation amongst his flock—no flushed countenance, no evidence of uneasiness. The eyes raised to his were serious or expectant, but in each case, innocent as his own. There

was one other person who observed the same thing, and drew his own conclusions. Vieux Joe, from his coign of vantage, watched and listened. What he noticed set his brain working. None of the sheep here present were so black that the Curé's remarks could pass, leaving no sign, as they might in the case of hardened offenders. That they did so, he attributed to the fact that there was nothing to conceal. None of these people knew anything about the cross. He made a careful note of the congregation, nodding once or twice to himself; of one thing he felt convinced—the "pious soul" referred to by M'sieur le Curé, must lie outside of priestly ministrations.

CHAPTER IV

The Bribe

THE Curé's words caused a sensation. Most of his congregation inclined to Narcisse Anjou's way of thinking. These shook their heads and vowed no good could come of the matter. It was all very well to attribute such things to charity, but M'sieur le Curé must know as well as they did, that no act of charity would long remain a secret in Ste. Marguerite. Besides, look at Narcisse, he had scarcely spoken a word since yesterday—the Curé must surely have heard of his encounter.

A few others, placing little faith in Narcisse and inclining to a material solution, were busy trying to saddle the responsibility on one or other of their neighbours. Of these latter, Madame Dufresne was certainly the most occupied. Together with the blacksmith, the Dufresnes were regarded as being the persons most interested in the matter, through

Madam's connection with the Laporte family; and she, herself, took good care to emphasize the importance of her position. Nevertheless, her pride suffered at the thought that both she and her husband were in complete ignorance concerning the perpetrator of this mystery, and she was determined to discover its origin. Not a day had passed since her husband had brought Vieux Joe's news from the creamery, but Pierre Larrebais, limping down the hill each evening for his allowance of scraps, had been caught and eagerly questioned by his cousin. Not that she could expect to learn much from a wild brat like that, who played in the woods all day like a young animal, seldom appeared in the school in winter, and, save when dragged by sheer force, had never crossed the church's threshold. A drunken father, a bad mother—the boy could not hope to escape his share of the devil.

On the Sunday already mentioned, it was later than usual when Pierre made his appearance in the back garden. August days were giving place to September dusky twilights to dark evenings; the clock above the kitchen table pointed to eight, the lamps had

been lit for an hour, and Madame Dufresne had journeyed half a dozen times between the kitchen and parlour to make sure that Pierre might not escape unnoticed. On the sixth occasion she was rewarded by the sound of a step upon the verandah, and Pierre looked in at the door. Madame beckoned him to enter, and placed a chair at the table. Filling a great mug with new milk, and taking a plate of bread and cold meat from the cupboard, she set them before him with her own hands, having motioned to the stolid maid-servant to leave the kitchen.

Unaccustomed to such graciousness, the child eyed his cousin with distrust, but, once seated before the repast, hunger overcame suspicion, and he fell to eating ravenously. Madame Dufresne drew up her chair to the other end of the table, and watched, until Pierre, the contents of the platter diminished by half, paused a moment to raise the big mug to his lips. Then she addressed him, in tones intentionally playful.

"Naughty boy, Pierre, you were not at Church this morning. What will M'sieur le Curé say?"

Pierre anticipating reproaches, grew sullen, raised his eyes to her face, and stared without replying.

"Poor boy, no wonder, you are ashamed to come in such old clothes. Is your father home yet, Pierre?"

The boy shook his head, and Madame Dufresne continued—

"M'sieur le Curé says you must attend school this winter, Pierre. He says you are not a bad boy and can learn well, and then you are growing big. Mon Dieu, what a tear in your packet. Would you like a new suit, little cousin?"

Pierre had been listening indifferently; now his mouth and eyes opened wide with astonishment. The question of dress entered into his calculations only when public decency forced him to seek village charity, in the shape of some cast-off garment. His father had once returned from Rivière-du-Loup bringing two pairs of trousers intended for a boy of fifteen. That was two years ago now, and Pierre still wore one of them, hitched high up under his arms, and extending down to his ankles—extremely loose and baggy behind. In

"Enough money . . . . . to buy things for themselves."

addition to these, his wardrobe at the present time, consisted of an old jacket and two blue shirts. Madame Perrault had promised him a pair of old boots to protect his feet during the winter.

His cousin's question, therefore, seemed unintelligible, and she was forced to repeat it a second time, before he grasped her meaning. When he did so, however, his cheeks flushed red under their coat of tan. He nodded his head, and waited, his large grey eyes fastened on her face.

"A good suit, Pierre, which would keep you warm all winter, and perhaps a pair of wool mitts and a muffler."

Pierre shook his head. "It's too much," he murmured dejectedly.

Madame smiled encouragement. "In big cities, Pierre, there are boys of your age who make enough money, by working, to buy things for themselves. Perhaps you could earn a suit, too."

"How?"

Madame glanced over her shoulder towards the door, to make sure that Antoinette was not within hearing. Then, lowering her voice,

and leaning across the table, she continued, a little nervously.

"Do you remember how we spoke last night, little cousin, about the old cross? Poor M'sieur le Curé is very worried about it. Would you like to be a good boy and help the Curé, Pierre? You are quite sure you know nothing?"

It was curious to note the change which had come over the boy's face during this speech. Suspicion had crept back, and, with it, a queer kind of cunning, mingled with fear. He shook his head emphatically.

"I have seen no one."

"No; but you have not watched, Pierre. Suppose you should watch near the cross to-night, hidden in the bushes."

"I would go to sleep."

"But suppose I should promise you that suit, Pierre, do you think you could tell me to-morrow, who visits the old cross?"

"I have seen nothing." Pierre jumped up from his chair, and limped towards the door, but Madame was before him. She caught his jacket, pulling him back with no gentle hand.

"Pierre, you are stupid. Listen to me."

She thrust him on to his chair, mounting guard over him.

"There can be no suit, if you do not earn it. If you sleep to-night, watch again to-morrow, little stupid."

"I am afraid of old Onesime Laporte." Pierre hung his head, muttering the words under his breath.

Madame started slightly. "Mon Dieu, that is a lie, Pierre, and you are a bad boy! Monsieur le Curé says it is some one in the parish, and what he says must be right."

"Will you tell M'sieur le Curé?"

"Certainly. Why else—"

"And he will tell everyone?" Pierre made another attempt at freedom as he spoke, but once again Madame proved the stronger. Her patience was giving out.

"Little fool! No, it is to remain a secret—the Curé said so this morning. No one will know but we three, M'sieur le Curé, myself and you. It is little enough to do to earn a suit—any other boy would be glad to help the Curé. They say it will be a cold winter, too, the squirrels are storing many nuts this year."

Madame paused. She saw that her arguments were gaining weight; Pierre sat suddenly still, as though thinking—perhaps the vision of many desolate winters confronted him. To be warm—Ah! he rubbed one bare foot along the floor, wriggling his toes as he did so. The other was curled about the leg of his chair, to the seat of which his hands clung tightly. He glanced first at his cousin, and then down at his restless bare toes. Two months from now, the snow would lie deep in the fields, and the north winds would bring their blizzards. Even to-night the air was sharp with frost. Suit, mitts, muffler, these things would mean luxury such as his short life had never known; with them and the old boots, he would be as well turned out as any boy in the village. And they were his, if—never had Pierre's brain worked so busily. He raised his eyes—

"M'sieur le Curé won't tell?" he demanded again.

"Certainly not. Of what are you afraid?"

"They might beat me for telling."

"Who?"

"The person."

"They will not know; the Curé will not speak."

"And I can have the suit?"

"Sure."

"And mitts and muffler?"

Madame nodded—she was all smiles now that her point was gained.

"And a tuque, too, if you are a good boy, Pierre."

A strange excitement seemed to shake the boy. He jumped suddenly from his chair—

"Eh bien! Eh bien! I will do it sure." He ended with an oath, which caused Madame to raise her hands in horror.

"But Pierre, Oh! mon Dieu, what a child! Pierre, you——" But he was gone; Madame hurried to the door— "To-morrow morning, Pierre, come in good time, and Antoinette will give you some breakfast. It is cold weather."

Whether he heard or not, she did not know. For answer came a sharp click, as the garden gate shut to behind him.

A half moon was rising, as Pierre turned into the back road; the landscape was quite clear, and, as he approached the millstream, he perceived the figure of a man leaning over

the right side of the bridge. It was Vieux Joe, one of the few people in the village for whom Pierre cherished a regard. The sight of him here, at this unwonted hour, however, set the boy wondering. Was it possible that Vieux Joe was going to watch the cross? He called out to him in passing.

"Bonsoir, Vieux Joe."

"Sapré, who is that?" exclaimed the pedlar, turning. "Oh, Pierre Larrebais, what are you doing? Come here out of the shadow, méchant."

Pierre stood still, but did not attempt to approach. He feared the pedlar might question him. Vieux Joe crossed over, and taking the boy by the shoulders, drew him reluctantly to the side of the bridge. They stood in the full moonlight. Vieux Joe placed one hand under Pierre's chin and lifted the boy's head; for a few moments he studied the raised face in silence—then:

"Onesime," he muttered. "It is Onesime—the nose, the forehead, the mouth, Mon Dieu! But there is something more, saint or devil, which? Go now, Pierre Larrebais." He dropped his hand. "It is time you were in

bed!" And so saying he turned towards the village.

Pierre limped on up the hill; after a little while he began to whistle, he even stopped to fling a stone into the ditch to see if the water had frozen. He was no longer worried; the meeting with Vieux Joe had suggested a way out of the difficulty—his mind was at rest. Reaching home, he climbed to his dark attic, and curling himself up on an old blanket, slept soundly until dawn, when the thought of his promised breakfast sent him down the hill an hour before sunrise.

Madame Dufresne, glancing from her window, saw him hanging about the garden, and hurried forth.

"Bonjour, petit cousin," she exclaimed graciously, and then, lowering her tones, "Were you a good boy, Pierre; have you seen anything?"

Pierre nodded. Madam's excitement waxed.

"Who?" she demanded.

"Vieux Joe." Pierre clutched her arm. "But you must never tell or he would kill me."

"You are sure?"

"Certain."

"Vieux Joe—mais Mon Dieu! it is he then." Her face flushed with triumph. You are a good boy, Pierre. Certainly I always thought he might have done it. You saw him yourself?"

The boy nodded again, this time with greater emphasis.

"And it was cold there, too, sure, it was cold."

"You shall have some hot coffee."

"And my suit."

"You are a good boy, Pierre. You shall that too, but remember it is a secret."

The face raised to her own was blandly innocent. Upon occasion Pierre had an engaging smile. M'sieur le Curé will tell you that it would have conquered angels. Madame turned to the house.

"Come child, Antoinette shall give you some breakfast."

And Pierre followed obediently.

CHAPTER V

The Cure's Vigil

UPON one thing only had Pierre failed to reckon when he told Madame Dufresne that Vieux Joe was responsible for the improvements at the old shrine—and this was, that his cousin should delay in communicating her knowledge to the Curé.

Madame, once in possession of the facts herself, was for the moment satisfied. Second thoughts, moreover, counselled prudence. Vieux Joe might have already informed M'sieur le Curé, or might intend doing so, in which case she would be regarded as a meddler. The Curé would demand an explanation of how she came by her knowledge, nor was she at all sure that he would approve of her methods. She decided, therefore, to let at least twenty-four hours elapse before communicating her news to the priest, by which time Vieux Joe would be well out of the village, on his week's rounds, and, had he

neglected a confession, she might be excused, in the interests of the parish, for taking the duty of communication upon herself.

It was no easy matter, however, thus to refrain from making use of her knowledge; not that she would have dared to reveal the secret openly, after what the Curé had commanded, that would have let loose the vials of his wrath on her own head, or worse still, the avenging sarcasm of Vieux Joe's mocking tongue. But a chance word here and there, together with a conscious superiority of manner in discussing the subject, would easily convey the suggestion of secret knowledge. This pleasure she was obliged for the moment to forego, and, to do her justice, she displayed a most admirable self-control; not even her husband suspected what emotion lay hidden behind the playful energy of her mood.

Meanwhile, the Curé puzzled his brains over the matter, and prayed fervently that an explanation might soon be forthcoming. His Sunday's appeal had met with no response, and, by noon on Monday, he was aware that some further action would have to be taken, as there seemed little hope of a voluntary

confession. He pondered the matter deeply, wondering what his good uncle would have done under the circumstances. The memory of old M'sieur Tetrault, which still lived amongst the parishioners, was apt, at times, to prove a handicap to the younger man. A personality stamped upon the parish by fifty years of ministry, had unconsciously attracted to itself certain traditions, and established usages as unchangeable apparently as a Papal pronouncement. This, the present Curé had found to his cost, especially during the first year after his induction to Ste. Marguerite. He lacked the magnetism which had endeared the old priest to his flock. The mantle of Elijah descending upon the expectant disciple, had required no little adjustment to render it a perfect-fitting garment. Now, after eight years, he had won the respect and confidence, if not, in every case, the love of his people.

At the present crisis he foresaw what serious evil threatened to spring from a matter in itself trivial. He began evolving a plan of his own, and what he saw and heard throughout the day, strengthened him in its execution. Had he ever undertaken, as he might

have done, to record the history of the old cross, these words, entered in his journal upon that Monday evening, might have found their place in such a chronicle:

"The whole village is by the ears over this affair of the cross, and I am determined to probe the matter to the bottom. The absurd theory, in regard to Onesime Laporte, has gained a greater hold than I could have imagined possible. Jules Larrebais at least is not involved, for I hear he was last seen in the police court at Quebec—he will not trouble the village again for some months. I hope in the meantime, some opportunity may be found for the instruction of that wild boy, Pierre."

Having finished this entry, the Curé closed his journal, and sat for a few minutes with his eyes fixed upon the flowered pattern of his red table cover. Presently, the clock in the kitchen sounded the half-hour; and M'sieur drew out his watch—the hands pointed to half-past ten. He wound it carefully before replacing it in his pocket. Then he rose, and, going into the tiny passage, donned his hat and coat. He listened a

"A chance word here and there . . . with a conscious superiority of manner."

moment to make sure, from sounds upstairs, that Marianne Rigault, his old housekeeper, had passed into the land of slumber. There was no mistaking the evidence, and, with a satisfied nod, the Curé opened his front door and stepped quietly out.

The night was very fine, growing clearer every moment, for the moon would soon rise. Down the whole length of the village street, not a soul stirred, except himself. No light shone in any window. The inhabitants of Ste. Marguerite had consigned themselves to slumber, and the care of God. Not even a dog barked as the Curé walked on briskly between rows of silent cottages. Passing the Dufresne garden, he turned to the left, and crossing a strip of green turf, entered the precarious region of the Concession Road, stumbling now and then, as his foot caught against a rut or turned upon some sharp stone. Once across the bridge, the road mended somewhat, and as he trudged on, the Curé had ample time to meditate upon his errand.

He reviewed the whole affair from the beginning. Of what infinite importance, in relation to their effects, were the most trivial

things in this life! How absurd this whole affair would appear to those who lived in some great city! But here, in Ste. Marguerite, where the mixed freight train, passing once a day, brought with it whatever news filtered from the outer world, was it any wonder that the renovation of a shrine should cause excitement?

By the time the Curé had reached the middle of the big hill, the moon had risen above the woods on the west summit. This was unfortunate, and he hurried onward to gain shelter, darkness being the mantle best suited to his purpose. Fifteen minutes hard climbing brought him to the top of the hill, and within sight of the cross, which it was now light enough to distinguish. A clump of raspberry and dogwood bushes skirted the upper side of the first Concession Road, spreading quite close to the fenced plot of the shrine, and on these the Curé fixed for a hiding place. Gathering up the folds of his cassock, he crept into the shadow of the bushes and crouched there. He was well hidden, and, by keeping his head turned slightly sidewise, had the cross clearly in sight.

The night was cold, and though heated by exercise, it was not long before M'sieur recognized that this vigil would make some demands upon his endurance. Half an hour passed in the same cramped position; his feet and hands were rapidly losing all sensation; an east wind had arisen, damp and chill, and the Curé, though determined to carry out his mission, feared none the less, its effect upon his rheumatism.

He shifted his position slightly, trusting to the wind rustling amongst the shrubs, to avert possible detection. As he did so, he could have sworn that a similar movement occurred upon the opposite side of the bushes. For a moment he was disconcerted. Was any one there? He was unprepared to stumble upon some one concealed in the same ambush as himself. He listened intently. All was still again; then the dry twigs stirred faintly. Perhaps a weazel, thought the Curé, half reassured, or a bird of some kind, that he had disturbed. He would investigate. Very carefully he extended his left hand, only to encounter a wild tangle of undergrowth and thorns. He drew back; then, trying once more, discovered a small

opening between the bushes. He shoved his hand through, passing it slowly along the ground. Suddenly it closed upon something which caused the Curé to start violently, whilst a chilly moisture broke out over his forehead.

He recoiled hastily, stifling, by a great effort, the exclamation on his lips. Was it possible? No, such an idea was absurd—but the thought recurred. He could have sworn that what he encountered amongst the bushes, was nothing less than another hand, colder than his own, frog-like, inhuman. It recalled vividly, and with realistic unpleasantness, the villagers' theory in regard to Onesime. Perhaps M'sieur's nerves were a little shaken by the east wind and the chilliness of his vigil. He thought of Onesime's death, and of the old man's undying anger. His Uncle, Monsieur Tetrault, had recounted the scene to him at the time, and he had heard it on many occasions since, from the lips of Madame Dufresne. It came now as a terrifying memory, and the Curé strove to banish it. How the wind rustled the bushes! Was it only the wind? He would make certain of that. He

had never felt so much like a coward! Doubtless his imagination was playing him tricks; he would try again. Not without a hastily murmured prayer the Curé leant forward. As he did so, a dark figure started up from behind, a musty potato sack was thrust over his head, and the next moment he felt himself being hauled backwards into the road.

CHAPTER VI

A Child's Heart

SO sudden and unexpected was the onslaught; so complete the eclipse of sight and cessation of air within the folds of dirty sacking, that the Curé may have wondered whether he had not been attacked by the Devil himself, and was about to be spirited to the realms of eternal darkness. Certain it is he lay quite still upon the road, his limbs outstretched, his cassock covered with dust and powdered leaves, to the utter consternation of his triumphant captor.

"Sapré! Mille noms de Dieu! It is the Curé!" The speaker's voice was choked, and his hands trembled in a hasty endeavour to remove the bag from his captive's head.

Meanwhile the Curé had found his voice, and strove, though feebly, to employ the authority of his office.

"Loose me! Let me go!" The tones were muffled. "Do you not see who I am? What

madness is this? Faugh—" a bit of decayed vegetable brushed against his mouth as the sack was dragged back from his flushed countenance. A reviving wave of cold air lent strength to his lungs and restored confidence to his shattered nerves. Between him and the starred expanse of Heaven interposed the agitated face of his assailant, and, in another minute, the Cure's fist might have scored its own measure of just punishment, but for a shock of recognition, which caused him to start into a sitting posture, exclaiming as he did so, in a voice stern with its sense of outraged dignity, "Vieux Joe, what does this mean? What are you doing here?"

"Mon Dieu, mon Dieu! M'sieur le Curé, but I am mad! Pardon, M'sieur, mille pardons! Sacré, but you frightened me! I began to think you were indeed Onesime—mon Dieu! What folly—what a stupid beast! But you are not hurt? Permit me, M'sieur—" Joe stopped and would have brushed the dust from the priest's cassock, but the Curé, who had risen, confronted him with upraised hand and stern visage—

"No, Joe Leroux, you cannot excuse your-

self so easily. What are you doing here at this hour? And why did you not tell me of this before? You had always a wicked tongue, but I did not suspect you of sowing mischief in the parish."

Joe's temper was touchy, a result perhaps of his scare. He answered brusquely, "Eh! M'sieur le Curé, you cannot play that trick on Vieux Joe. I can mind my own business as well as you. If you wish me to say nothing —Vieux Joe is silent as the stones. Take care of the shrine as long as you like, M'sieur. I have seen nothing!"

"You think, then my friend, that I have done this?" The Curé gazed at the little pedlar, who relapsed into disgruntled silence.

"Who else, M'sieur?"

"Yourself."

"Nom de St. Joseph! That I should be accused of such piety.

Joe thrust his hands through his hair and stared wildly at his companion.

"You will pardon me, M'sieur, but I think we are both mad. I suspected someone; I came to watch."

"And I also, my friend."

"It was your hand that touched mine."

"I suppose so."

"Sapré, I was afraid! Mon Dieu! M'sieur le Curé, you have cold hands sure!"

"If they were as cold as yours, Joe, they were like ice. But perhaps the east wind had chilled us."

Joe chuckled. "Or Onesime," he murmured beneath his breath. But the Curé gave no sign of having heard. He pursued his own thoughts, and, once more, Joe grew serious.

"M'sieur is prepared to stay longer?" he questioned suddenly.

"Do you think it is of use, Joe?"

"Perhaps. It is not certain, we may have been heard."

"Do you suspect someone?"

"Sure." The Curé regarded him doubtfully.

"Then it is foolish to expose ourselves in the moonlight; let us find shelter."

"M'sieur is right. On the other side of these bushes is the best place. We can see well.

They withdrew from the road, and skirting the bushes carefully, Joe disclosed his hiding

place close to the fence rails, and safely hidden by overhanging branches. Once more silence reigned, broken only by a whispered question and answer from one or other of the watchers, as they settled down to the renewed vigil. At first the Curé questioned his companion sceptically. Whom did he suspect? "Some poor fool." But the man's name? "I don't know!" Joe was obstinate. Had M'sieur le Curé no ideas himself upon the subject? No, he was at a loss to explain the circumstances. Doubtless, M'sieur had heard the talk about Onesime? Joe hazarded the question. Emphatically the Curé declared his annoyance at all such folly. M'sieur then did not believe in ghosts? Mon Dieu, that east wind made one shiver! The Curé demanded silence. This was no time for converse; their voices might carry.

During the pause which followed, secure in each other's protection, both watchers may have dozed. It was long past midnight, and dark clouds drifting up from the south-east, threatened soon to obscure the moonlight. The Curé started suddenly to feel Vieux Joe's

hand grasping his arm and hear his excited whisper.

"There, M'sieur—look, look!"

Through the screen of protecting branches they peered forth, gazing up the rough hill which rose behind the shrine. In another ten minutes it would have been too late, but the night was still bright; woods, stones, fences, stood out distinct and sombre, framed against the moonlight. Descending the open hillside, from the woods to westward, was a small dark object, moving directly towards them. As it drew nearer, both men recognized the figure of a boy; a figure, with limping gait. His arms were laden with branches, trailing vines, and ragged bunches of wild flowers. The Curé could have cried out, so great was his astonishment; instead, he pressed his companion's arm, and both remained silent, their eyes fixed upon the boy.

There was no awkwardness in his movements. His queer little figure seemed to suit, in a peculiar fashion, the ruggedness of its surroundings. Despite his lameness he was surefooted, not once did he slip or stumble on the rough descent. When close to the little

plot, he stopped to listen, glancing about nervously as he did so. Assured that all was well, he advanced, opened the gate, and depositing his burden close to the fence, set quickly to work. With deft fingers he wound the vines about the shrine and lower portion of the cross—branches of autumn maple, and dog-wood planted close against its base, would glow, a vivid spot of colour, in the morrow's sunshine. Shaggy asters and golden rod, already tipped with frost, replaced some withered willow herbs upon the grass.

Clouds had obscured the moon, making it difficult for the two men to distinguish the boy's quick movements. Vieux Joe muttered softly under his breath; as to the Curé, he was silenced utterly. The moment had become tense. His heart suddenly yearned over this little savage, the outcast of his flock. Through the darkness came a faint radiance, growing slowly brighter. The clouds parted, pale light transformed the hillside, the shrine stood clear. His task ended, the boy knelt before the cross; his head thrown back—a tragic child face uplifted towards the sky. The soft light fell full upon it.

"Onesime, Onesime—" Joe murmured, but the Curé motioned him to silence. What prayer had this ignorant child in his heart? The words reached them, shrill and startling, breaking in upon the deep silence.

"O, God, it is not Thy shrine; it belongs to Jules Larrebais, and he does not care. But she cared. O, God, let her love me. I will keep the shrine. I will give it to Thee, but tell her that Pierre belongs to her, that she is his mother—and burn up the people who hurt her."

A paroxysm of passion seemed to shake the boy as he uttered these last words, his raised head fell forward, and in another moment he lay prone upon the grass, his face buried in his hands. The Curé thrust aside the branches, and emerged from his hiding place. Vieux Joe following in his wake. Even the rustle of leaves failed to attract the boy's attention. Two pairs of wet eyes gazed silently down at the little figure before them. Then the Curé, motioning his companion back into the shadow, leant forward and reaching over, placed his hand upon a heaving shoulder.

"Pierre Larrebais," he said gently, "Pierre, my poor little boy!"

With a cry of fear, the boy raised his head. Then catching sight of the two figures above him, scrambled to his feet and stood like a startled animal prepared for flight. His fists were tightly clenched; the eyes which met the Curé's were sullen and defiant.

M'sieur spoke again, and Vieux Joe marvelled secretly at the gentleness of his voice—

"You are a clever boy, Pierre, to twist those vines so gracefully. You are fond of the old shrine. It belongs to your father."

There was no answer. The boy's eyes never glanced from the Curé's face, and the latter continued.

"And before that to your great-grandfather; your mother, too, used to tend it. Doubtless it would please her to know it is still remembered."

Pierre moved a little uneasily, his head dropped.

"I don't care," he muttered sullenly.

"Certainly not, Pierre, you never knew your mother—you could not care for her."

The priest's voice had lost all trace of feeling, he spoke carelessly. His words stung; in the depth of Pierre's heart, there awoke a spirit of protest.

"Did you know her?" he demanded defiantly.

"No, Pierre, I did not. But here is one who did. Vieux Joe, tell Pierre about his mother."

A cry startled them. Until now, Pierre had failed to recognize M'sieur's companion, standing silently a few paces behind the Curé, but as Joe advanced, and at sound of his name, a stricken conscience called to his mind a vision of immediate retribution. Doubtless the pedlar's hand could be heavy as that of Jules Larrebais when prompted by the spirit of righteous indignation. Pierre had no time for consideration; safety lay in flight alone. With an agility which came near to frustrating all the Curé's hopes, he turned and sprang at the opposite fence. Despite his lameness, he had scaled it before either of the two men realized his intention. Vieux Joe darted forward, but even then would have been too late, but for the unfortunate looseness of the nether garments, imported two years previ-

ously, from Rivière-du-Loup. Pierre, in scrambling downwards, found himself suddenly suspended from a sharp fence stake by the baggy seat of his ample trousers.

The Curé released him, and Pierre fought like a little savage, swearing and crying alternately:

"She is mean—she is bad! She has told him—he will kill me. Let me go! Let me go!" His teeth met in the Curé's sleeve, and a long tearing sound followed. Still M'sieur struggled, never relaxing his hold. Joe gripped the boy's arms, and threw them backward. Pierre fought with his knees in a last effort. The Curé stooped and caught one kicking leg and then the other. In another moment, sobbing and gasping, Pierre lay stretched on the wet grass, his conquerors bending over him.

"Pierre Larrebais, you are either a very bad boy, or a very foolish one," said the Curé sternly.

"She — swore — she — would — not — tell —". The words escaped between long drawn sobs.

The Curé was not a quick-witted man, but

either the cold night air or his recent adventures had stirred his mind to unusual keenness. He suspected that here lay some mystery more serious perhaps than the sudden renovation of the shrine; a plot, of which this child might be the victim. He waited silently, therefore. Questions might hinder rather than serve his object. Pierre continued between his sobs:

"She is — wicked — my cousin. He will— beat me—" pointing to Vieux Joe.

The Curé remonstrated. "Surely not, Pierre. Why should he?"

"I told her a lie. She told him."

"Who? Madame Dufresne?"

The boy nodded keeping a furtive eye upon Joe. For a moment the Curé was puzzled. Then a flash of intuition, suggested perhaps by his personal knowledge of Pierre's relative, set him upon the right track.

"She wished to know who cared for the shrine?"

"Yes." The boy had stopped sobbing, but a suspicious gulp followed close upon his answer.

"And you told her it was Vieux Joe?"

The Curé hazarded the question. Pierre raised himself to a sitting posture; his right hand plucked at the long grass by his side. His head was bent.

"I saw Vieux Joe by the bridge and I wanted the clothes."

"Did she promise you clothes?"

"Yes."

"Sapré, what a woman!" The exclamation was Joe's. It was the first time he had spoken, and Pierre started at his voice. "Pierre, mon gars, that was last night we met by the bridge?"

"Yes. She promised she would not tell—only the Curé. She said he would not tell either."

"And you made her believe it was Vieux Joe?" The pedlar chuckled with amusement. "Mon Dieu, M'sieur, no wonder you thought I was playing tricks."

"But, my friend, I knew nothing of this. Our good friend has not trusted me with her secret."

"Aha! Then she is more wise than I thought. Pardon, M'sieur, I meant no offence,

but there are questions M'sieur would be sure to ask. She is wise, that woman!"

But the Curé was not listening; only the one word caught his ear attuning itself to his thought. "Wise!" If ever a man stood in need of "wisdom" he was the man this night. He glanced at the small piece of humanity at his feet. Pierre no longer plucked at the grass; he was listening intently, his eyes fixed upon Vieux Joe's face. Here was a problem, thought the Curé. He stooped, and taking Pierre by the arm raised him up. With one hand upon the boy's shoulder he spoke slowly with no trace of his former severity:

"Pierre Larrebais, why did you not tell Madame Dufresne the truth?"

Pierre was silent. "That's not her business," he muttered after a few moments.

"Perhaps not, but there was no need to tell lies."

Like a flash the boy's anger blazed forth anew.

"Yes there was, sure. She tells lots of bad things about my mother, and I heard them—and I heard about the shrine and Onesime, and how my mother looked after the shrine. It

belongs to Jules Larrebais and not to le bon Dieu. And if I told her the truth she would laugh and they'd all laugh. I hate them all except Vieux Joe, and I hate him too, if he beats me."

"I am sorry, Pierre, that you hate them." The priest's hand dropped from the boy's shoulder, but Pierre stood quivering and unabashed. There was a long silence, then Vieux Joe stretched out a hand and pirouetted the delinquent around towards himself.

"I was right," he said nodding his head sagely, "I was right! Petit Pierre, it strikes me there has been very little in that small stomach of thine to-day. See," and he produced some bread and cheese from his coat pocket, "here is supper, though it comes late, and it is time you were in bed. No one in the parish will touch your shrine. Vieux Joe will answer for that, and M'sieur le Curé too, I think—eh M'sieur?"

The Curé nodded. "You are right, Joe. We should all have been in bed long ago. Pierre, my child, we will talk no more to-night. You will come and see me to-morrow

after early Mass. I will tell Marianne to give you some breakfast. Remember, I trust you."

Pierre stared wonderingly from one to another, unable to credit his understanding. The Curé's hand fell lightly on his head.

"Good-night Pierre. To bed quickly, and may God bless you. You are quite safe?"

"Quite safe, M'—" the sentence was not finished. A hard lump rose suddenly in Pierre's throat, his face worked. In another moment he had turned and was running in the direction of his father's cottage.

PART THREE

CHAPTER I

The Curé Makes a Bargain

FROM that night onward, a new era dawned in the life of Pierre Larrebais. The next morning saw him for a long hour closeted with M'sieur le Curé, and it would be hard to say which gained more from the interview.

To Pierre, the Curé's attitude was at first wholly incomprehensible, and, therefore, to be regarded with suspicion. Morning had restored him once more to normal. In the kitchen Marianne Rigault found him the defiant little savage of the hillside. But to the Curé, whose mind was still possessed by the strange happenings of the night, he was a brand snatched from the burning. From the time of Jules Larrebais' return to the parish six years ago, the Curé had waged a constant battle with him for the possession of his son. It is probable that the priest might have won, had Pierre's views upon the subject coincided

with his, or even had the boy remained neutral. But, from the first dawn of conscious life in the child's mind, this extraordinary creature had exhibited a will and individuality altogether his own. Upon one point, however, Jules Larrebais and his son held the same opinion. Jules required no benefits from the Church, and no priest was allowed to enter his cottage. As to Pierre, with surprising alacrity, he would limp off as fast as his lame leg would carry him at so much as a glimpse of M'sieur's black robes; whilst to catch sight of the school mistress, even from a distance, was sufficient to prevent a visit to the village for some time to come.

His companions, then, were those of the wild. He knew every bird's note by heart and could imitate it exactly—blue bird and oriole, robbin and song sparrow. He could call the crows to him or lead an unsuspecting partridge at will through the forest. He could have shown you the lynx spoors, or the hole of the mother fox with her young. He knew the tricks of the martin, the quick restless movement of the weasel amongst the grass, the soft velvet touch of the garter snake, and

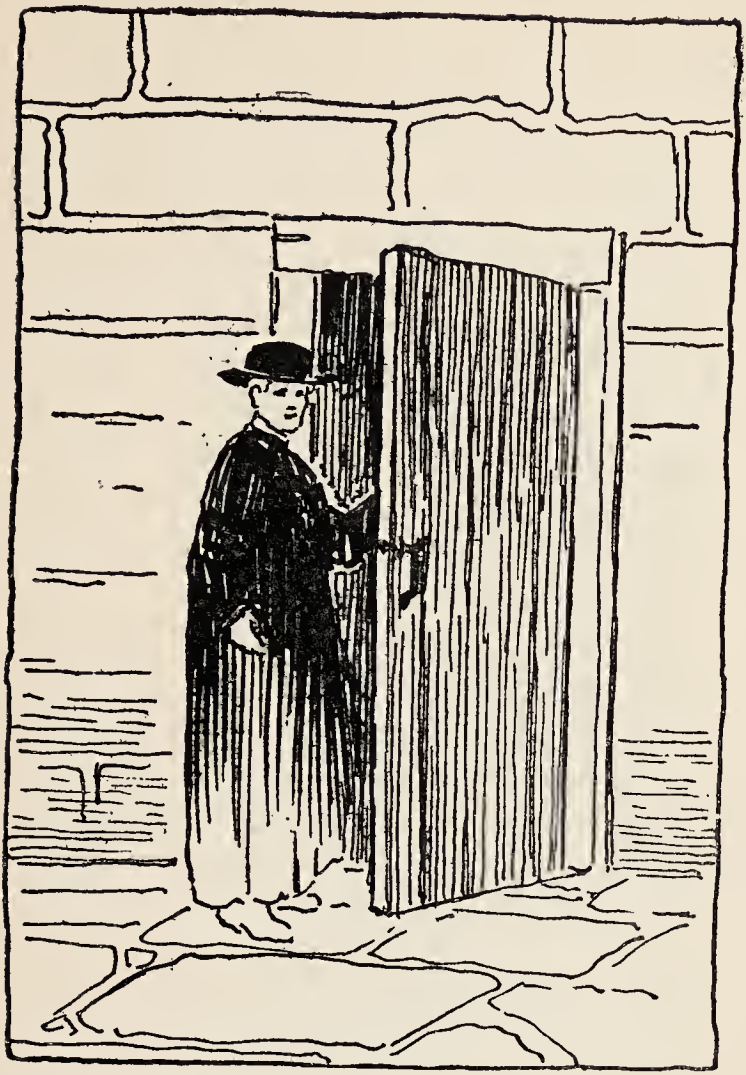
cosy nest where the tiny field mouse conceals her babes. All these children of the woods Pierre had taken to his heart and made his brothers, since those early days, when little more than a baby, the fear of Jules Larrebais would drive him forth to a bed amongst soft moss and whispering bracken—a sore-hearted little boy, without friends, without home, without comfort!

As he grew older, Pierre lost his fear of the school mistress. The arrival of the Dufresnes at Ste. Marguerite made some difference in his life. Madame was scandalized at his neglected condition and did what she felt was compatible with her position to relieve his suffering and her own conscience. Her charity, of course, was purely material—a plate of scraps once or twice a day, did the child care to come for them; an endeavour to enforce the ablution of hands and face when necessary, and the occasional patching of a torn garment.

Pierre was morbidly sensitive and disliked the village children. His foster brothers and sisters, the Perraults excepted, he had little to do with them. When he was nine years old

he was induced one morning by the latter to accompany them to school, and thereafter went occasionally when inclination moved him. He was no dunce, and the little leaven was not without its effect; but to Church he could be lured but seldom. At the age of eleven he knew the two first answers of his Catechism, the "Pater" and "Ave", his ignorance being a scandal to all the good mothers of the parish.

That the Curé, therefore, should find much to hope for from this sudden display of religious sentiment, which even in his most sanguine moments had been unsuspected, is not surprising, for his experience hitherto had been restricted to the normal and conventional. Naughty or good they might be, as the mood took them, these little maids and urchins of his flock, but in the end, they followed obediently along the narrow path indicated by their watchful shepherd. That Pierre was not of this type the Curé knew. He had half suspected that the boy would not keep his promise, and appear at the Presbytery in the morning; thereby proving that he guessed but little of the forces at work in the child's



"M'sieur le Curé."

mind. Ten minutes' conversation, however, with the ragged, barefooted boy, whom Marianne Rigault thrust into her master's study with an exclamation upon his uncouth appearance, convinced the Curé that his hopes had been misplaced. Pierre Larrebais was as much a stranger to religious sentiment, as the yellow cur that followed close at his heels.

What passion then had driven that wild prayer from his lips not more than eight hours before? Sentiment? Yes; but of a different order—the awakened love of an imaginative and undisciplined child for a mother whom he had never seen. The Curé marvelled; the more he talked with him, the more he recognized that this love was the only channel by which he might hope to reach Pierre's grey little soul. His position as priest held no weight with the boy; only as man and brother could he succeed. In recognizing this fact, M'sieur had really made the first mile post on a road hitherto untravelled; indeed his journey had commenced overnight had he but known it. Nor did his efforts go unrewarded. Pierre had come to the Presbytery as a naughty boy prepared for punishment, defiance in his atti-

tude, and fear knocking at his heart. The Curé's unexpected kindness acted like a magic herb fraught with healing. Little by little, his defiance broke down, fear vanished, and for the time at least, suspicion veiled its face.

The tale of Madame Dufresne's bribe and his own duplicity was unfolded; then, by degrees as the confession grew, M'sieur heard the story of "Jules Larrebais' cross" as Pierre had heard it that night almost a month before, from the lips of his cousin. This required patience, for the tale came in fragments, a question here, an answer there, while the Curé sorted and pieced and expurgated many expressions which he judged unnecessary. Yes, it was a long hour. Towards the end, Pierre jumped suddenly off the high-backed chair on which he had been seated opposite the Curé, and stood erect before him. His voice shook a little as he spoke—

"M'sieur le Curé, she was not wicked, my mother?" The boy's eyes were hard.

The Curé shook his head. "No, my child, Lucille Decelles was not a wicked woman. She was wronged by those who should have loved her most."

Pierre's expression changed; he clenched his small brown fist, and shook it almost in the Curé's face.

"I'll kill anyone who says she's bad!" he exclaimed in a shrill voice tremulous with fury.

The Curé stood up. "In that case, Pierre, I must find someone else to take care of the cross. You will soon be in jail."

The boy scowled, but the Curé continued:

"Listen to me, Pierre Larrebais, I intend to make you responsible for the old cross, and the parish shall know it, but only so long as you will behave like a boy, and not like a wild animal. There must be no more 'killing', no more lies, there must be school and church—do you understand? If not, I will buy the old cross myself from your father, and place another in charge of it."

The Curé's eyes were stern, but Pierre met their glance without flinching. There was a short pause, then—

"He would not sell," Pierre remarked a little contemptuously.

"Do not make any mistake, Pierre, your father will sell his dearest possession—the days

are past when he could refuse good money."

His words were true, and Pierre was shrewd enough to know it. He heard the death knell of his hopes. He was silent, and the Curé, watching his face closely, could read the signs of struggle.

"To school every day?" he asked presently.

The Curé nodded. "And to church and Sunday School, Pierre." M'sieur walked over to the window, and stood looking into the farmyard, his back turned to the boy. Pierre did not move; five minutes passed.

"Was my mother pretty?"

The Curé started at the irrelevancy of the question. Never had he striven to trace the working of a child's mind so earnestly as this morning.

"Yes, Pierre, I have heard that she was.

"Had she yellow hair?"

"Yes, I think so . . . . . Yes, I remember hearing that she was fair." The Curé had turned from the window genuinely puzzled, and the two confronted one another. With something between a sob and a groan Pierre spoke.

"I will go to Church—and to school—and —I can keep the cross."

"That is a promise, Pierre." The Curé held out his hand, and reluctantly the boy took it.

"Bien, mon enfant, we will begin tomorrow, but we must have some better clothes than these," looking down at the disreputable trousers and shirt.

"I have none."

"Your cousin has not yet given the suit?"

"No."

"You cannot take it, Pierre. She must be told the truth."

A deep flush rose beneath the boy's tanned skin—once again his face grew sullen, but the Curé paid no heed.

"I will see Madame Dufresne myself, Pierre, and speak to her. This evening, after supper, we will see what can be done. Au revoir, mon petit, and remember what I have said—all depends on yourself."

A side door opened from the study on to the verandah; the Curé unlatched it as he spoke, and Pierre limped out. He made no response to the Curé—spoke no word of

thanks. He wished to get away quickly, to be by himself, on the hillside, in order to understand what had happened. He felt as dejected as Bijou, who followed him with flopping ears and tail pitifully limp.

CHAPTER II

Joe Displays His Wares

THE sun beat down upon the village street and as he drew near the forge, Pierre could hear the resounding blows of Narcisse Anjou's hammer. A couple of buckboards passed; he caught sight of his foster-mother, Madame Perrault, wringing clothes in her back garden, a year old baby clinging to her skirts. The older children were all at school, where he would be tomorrow; yes, and the day after, and the day after that again. He was no longer free, no longer "petit Pierre" of the hillside, going and coming at his own will, a little savage, whom despite his lameness, the village children had learnt to hold in awe, but Pierre Larrebais, pupil of Madame Berubé, and instructed in the Sunday School by M'sieur le Curé himself. For a moment he was tempted to return to the Presbytery and refuse the priest's conditions. There was no more miserable small

boy in the Province than Pierre Larrebais as he limped homeward that September morning.

A sudden yap from his canine companion drew Pierre's attention to the fact that they were approaching dangerously near to Madame Dufresne's garden, and Mouche, the black spaniel, was already hailing them. This would never do. Pierre turned hastily, certain that of all the people in the world, he did not wish to encounter his cousin at that moment. A narrow footpath on the left led down to the millstream, which divided the Dufresne farm-yard from the meadows beyond. At the back of the barn, a bridge of rough logs had been thrown across the stream, and over this the ploughs bumped, reaper and rake rattled, and hay carts creaked and groaned at intervals during the busy months of spring and harvest. It was too late in the season now, for Pierre to run any risk of a chance encounter with Monsieur Dufresne or any of his labourers. Only the root crops lay still afield, and they were on the east side of the road, behind the creamery. He crossed the bridge fearlessly therefore, and struck out obliquely across the first meadow, all thought

of return banished for the time being, by the necessity of placing as wide a distance as possible between himself and his watchful relative. He gained the back road presently, scrambling over the wooden fence near the foot of the big hill, and limped slowly on, pausing now and then to look back or send a loose stone spinning downwards with a shove from his bare toes. But his thoughts were elsewhere, otherwise the brown squirrel chattering on the fence post half-way up the hill, would have served as playmate for a diverting half hour. But by this time the arms and top of the old cross were visible and Pierre's gaze was fixed upon it; only Bijou's sharp eyes followed master squirrel's frisking movements along the fence rail.

Another meeting, however, awaited "petit Pierre" upon this eventful morning. As he drew near the cross, a voice hailed him suddenly from the roadside, and like an unexpected apparition, the figure of Vieux Joe rose suddenly from amongst the yellow bracken. For a moment the sight struck even deeper dismay into Pierre's heart; with a bound his mind travelled to the deferred

chastisement of the previous night. He stood his ground, however, and gazed boldly at the pedlar.

"Bonjour petit Pierre, how are you little crow?"

Pierre nodded. "Bonjour, Vieux Joe. You have not got far this morning."

"No indeed, having been up half the night in search of bad boys! Where have you been, méchant?"

"At M'sieur le Curé's." Pierre frowned as he spoke, remembering the outcome of his visit.

Vieux Joe whistled, then he regarded Pierre contemplatively for a moment.

"Aha! At M'sieur le Curé's. Has M'sieur made a good Catholic of you? Come here a moment, my son. Sit down!"

Pierre hesitated. He felt safer on his feet, and with a distance of some yards between himself and Joe.

"Come, I tell you. Mon Dieu! am I a bear? Does he think I will eat him?"

Pierre advanced cautiously, and seated himself by the roadside where the other indicated. Taking no further notice of the boy, Joe

"The Mysteries of
Joe's portmanteau."

drew towards him a small portmanteau of shiny black leather, and, opening it, began to turn over the contents.

A roll of blue ribbon, a card of lace, four skeins of red wool, twelve red and white cotton handkerchiefs, a card of trinkets, and a blouse length of yellow muslin were removed carefully and placed on a square of thin brown oilcloth, extended close to his side. Pierre watched curiously, fear banished by the interest of the moment. Few, if any, were the small boys who had penetrated into the mysteries of Joe's portmanteau.

Now a blue and white Madonna found her way onto the mat to be followed by a card of Parmachene Belles over which Joe grunted his approval.

"She beats all the Quebec flies, sure! I caught a five-pound trout with her last fall," he remarked.

Pierre gazed delightedly at the treasures, A baseball, some magenta ribbon, and a small frying pan took their place amongst the others; and still Joe continued to disgorge. A jar of pink sugar sticks, and a box of red and white horsemen, shaped out of crystalized

gum and suspended from thin strings of black elastic, held the boy's attention, bringing swift disfavour upon Bijou, who ventured too near these delectable sweetmeats. Gingerbread horses followed, then two pen-knives, some yards of red flannel and a gigantic corkscrew—wonderful medley—and, that the spiritual might not appear neglected amid so many material comforts, Joe now produced a red leather prayer-book and two brown rosaries.

As one thing after another made its appearance, it became clear to Pierre that this was no idle exhibition, undertaken for his gratification. No, Joe was searching for something, which, from his grunts and exclamations, the boy judged he had mislaid.

When the portmanteau was almost emptied, the pedlar abandoned further effort in that direction and turned his attention to a large bundle, enveloped in turkey red cotton, which contained dress goods and other material. What was Joe looking for? Pierre wondered. The bundle was carefully undone, and piece by piece, silk, cashmere, and calico were

placed on one side. Pierre's attention wandered back to the sugar sticks.

"Voila! Now, my child, I have a word for you."

Vieux Joe had found what he sought. In the midst of the pile, on top of a piece of bright green silk, lay a small wooden box. He took it up and lifted the cover. The box was lined with red plush and seemed to Pierre to contain many odd trifles jumbled together, with scraps of paper and two ends of narrow blue ribbon. Taking one of these ends between his thumb and forefinger, Joe drew the ribbon towards him, and, as it unrolled, Pierre noticed that attached to it was a small silver medal, such as the country children wear for protection against evil. On one side was stamped the figures of the Virgin and Child, whilst upon the other was traced the head and shoulders of St. Anthony. Joe held the medal in his hand and gazed at it for a few moments without speaking. Then he turned to the wondering boy.

"Pierre Larrebais, this belonged to your mother. I gave it to her myself, my boy, when she was a little girl smaller than you

are. Mon Dieu, what a child that was, and always a friend of Vieux Joe's 'Vieux Joe, tell me a story!' she would say. 'Make haste, bad man, quick, quick!' What a child!"

Pierre's eyes were fixed on the speaker, and Joe continued:

"One morning, when I passed the house, it was in the good days then, she came running out. 'Vieux Joe, Vieux Joe, it is my birthday to-day. Look at my shoes; Grandpère gave them to me. And Grandmère will bake a big cake and it is for me, and, this evening, Grandpère will take roses up to the cross because it is my birthday!' Then she put one finger in her mouth, and danced up and down on the garden path like an elf."

" 'Then I must surely find something too for the petit chou,' I said, so I opened the big bag, there by the side of the fence, and when she saw that, she stopped dancing and came close to the gate to peep over. I had lots of things that day, for the week before I had been to Rivière-du-Loup, and, on the top of all, lay the medal just the same as now."

"When the little Lucille caught sight of that she clapped her hands. 'For me, for me!'

she cried. 'Dear Vieux Joe, I love you very much.' "

" 'How much is that?' I asked her."

" 'Like the whole world, and Grandpère and Grandmère, and my black lamb.' "

" 'Then you must have the medal, petite,' I said, and I tied it about her neck, while the old Madame Laporte watched us from the doorway."

"Ah, mon Dieu! It was near the end of the good days, if we had known." Joe sighed as he spoke. "She had need of that medal, if ever child had. Next winter old Madame Laporte died, and then the bad times began for the poor little one. Soon she went to the Convent and there was not much seen of her in Ste. Marguerite for seven years. But she never forgot her friends, Pierre. Even the year before Jules Larrebais came, when all the boys were mad after her, it was 'Vieux Joe, will you walk up the hill this evening?' when Onesime sent her up to the cross. And she was beautiful, my boy. Your mother looked like a picture, but her heart was too young and tender to understand the evil which she saw. Always the old medal was about her

neck. Only a week before she died I met her, Pierre—she was ill then, but she made no complaint. 'You have been a good friend, Vieux Joe,' she said, 'and it has been a good friend too,' and she touched the medal, 'and the only one that has never left me.' Then she turned away, but it was a good thing for your father, Pierre Larrebais, that I did not meet him that day. When I saw her again, my son, she was dead, but she was beautiful still. They would have buried her with the medal upon her breast, but I said 'No, that is all she has for him. It was her best friend, some day it may be his!' So it came back to Vieux Joe's bag and has travelled there ever since. To-day it goes on a new journey."

He stopped speaking, and, knotting the ends of ribbon, leant over towards Pierre, and before the astonished boy realized his intention, the medal was about his neck.

"There! M'sieur le Curé will think you are converted indeed when he sees that."

Then, without giving Pierre time to respond, he broke out brusquely:

"Nom de St. Joseph, but I am an old fool wasting half my day by the roadside! Quick,

Pierre, my boy, in with all this rubbish! What folly! And I am due in St. Pascal to-morrow, and must reach Alfred Mercier's by sunset."

Joe continued to mutter, as he tugged the turkey red bundle into shape; while Pierre, his thoughts chasing each other in wildest confusion, busied himself over the portmanteau.

"Bah! Pierre, your dog must have worms —his hunger is unappeasable. He will be content with nothing but a whole horseman. Well, here is one for his master, too," and the pedlar thrust his hand amongst the crystalized riders before snapping down the box lid.

When all was ready, he rose and shook himself once or twice like a dog; then stooping, thrust a stout stick under the knots of red cotton and lifted the big bundle to his shoulders. Pierre rose, too. With an effort he lifted the portmanteau and handed it to Joe. Then they stood by the roadside looking at one another. Pierre essayed to speak. His cheeks grew crimson with effort, but no words would come. Perhaps Joe read his thoughts; he nodded to him shortly and took a few steps forward. Pierre watched him, then Joe stopped suddenly and wheeled about.

"Enough, Pierre! Ste. Marguerite sees me on Saturday; if you have not been to school, if you are not in Church on Sunday, there is no one in the parish can give a better hiding than Vieux Joe. Remember, my son. Goodbye."

He left Pierre staring after him along the road.

CHAPTER III

An Encounter

AFTER twelve years of neglect the old cross had found a new keeper, and now it entered once again into the life and interest of the community.

Madame Dufresne was amongst the foremost in promoting this revival. There is no clear record of what passed between herself and the Curé on that memorable evening when the latter with much ceremony was ushered into the Dufresne parlour, and with little hesitation explained the object of his visit. At the moment, he was out of patience with Madame Dufresne, and did not spare her feelings in the recital of Pierre's story, nor his opinion of her share in it. Being at heart a kind woman, under all her disguise of affectation, Madame did not listen unmoved. As the Curé spoke, her own conduct began to assume a different colour; she felt ashamed, and, towards the end, M'sieur le Curé, per-

ceiving this, softened his tone and continued with greater leniency. After all, it was no easy thing for Madame Dufresne to acknowledge herself in the wrong. For once her accustomed "savoir-faire" deserted her; she made no attempt at justification, and, from this fact, the Curé judged how much his tale had impressed her.

Indeed, Madame was completely astonished. She beheld her judgment shipwrecked, her conduct arraigned, herself flouted, and all this brought about by the least consequential member of her community—a small urchin, whom she had been accustomed to regard as no better than a savage. Her brain reeled. Of one thing only was she certain, Monsieur Dufresne had driven over on business to St. Ignace, and would not be home before midnight; for this she was thankful; she could not have borne that he should witness her discomfiture. But, when the Curé spoke of Pierre's passion for his dead mother, her thoughts turned from herself to the boy. It was extraordinary, she exclaimed. "Who would have thought it?" She stared at the

"M'sieur le Curé's Journal."

priest conscience-stricken, and he knew then that his mission was accomplished.

Only a brief entry marked M'sieur le Curé's journal in regard to that evenings visit. "Madame Dufresne has a better heart than I imagined, but I could not allow her to give Pierre the clothes; it would be bad for the boy. I will see to them myself. I have another plan in my head for my good friend Madame."

What that plan was is not recorded until later. Perhaps M'sieur felt it was too much a dream of the future to hazard any hint of it at that moment. He was satisfied, however, that Madame Dufresne's thoughts had been turned in the right direction, but where the path might end would depend as much upon Pierre and Jules Larrebais as upon herself.

Pierre appeared at school the morning after his interview with the Curé in a new suit of blue homespun, purchased by M'sieur at Label's store, the previous evening. His appearance caused a sensation; insignificant, however, compared with that created throughout the village before noontime, by the news that M'sieur le Curé had discovered the re-

novator of the shrine. No name was disclosed, but on consultation with the Dufresnes—and from this we may judge how the rumour started—M'sieur had decided that such a work should be performed only by one of those closely concerned in the history of the cross. The good office would be continued—here followed the kernel of the matter—and if a bombshell had burst in the village, there could have been no greater excitement. The Curé had chosen Pierre Larrebais to perform it.

"Where is Onesime now?" demanded Denis Camuel, drawing up his buckboard outside the blacksmith's shop, on his way from the creamery. "Perhaps he is locked up in the forge at night, eh Narcisse?"

Narcisse grew purple with rage. "M'sieur le Curé is a fool," he exclaimed, and shook a fist in Denis' face, by way of endorsing his statement.

"Be quiet, Narcisse!" His wife thrust her head out of the window. "You are too ready with your 'fools'—stay closer to home when you seek them."

A roar of laughter followed from the farm-

ers grouped about the entrance. Narcisse, disconcerted, sought refuge at his forge.

Madame Perrault, Pierre's foster-mother, spent a whole half-hour at her gate discussing the matter, and Madame, with eleven mouths to feed, was not a woman to waste time on trifles.

Madame Lebel stepped across from the store, together with her neighbour, the post-mistress, Louis Fiset's wife. By reason of her connection with Pierre, Madame Perrault held first place in the discussion.

"But what will Jules Larrebais say to this?" asked Madame Lebel, the practical-minded.

"Bah! Jules Larrebais is safe inside the jail at Quebec until New Year's," answered Pierre's foster mother.

"And then?" demanded the other.

Madame Perrault was pressed for an answer. Her mind seemingly had not travelled beyond that period. Here Madame Fiset came to the rescue, though where she gained her information, and whether it was authentic, or merely the outcome of a lively imagination, is doubtful.

"They say M'sieur le Curé will write to

Quebec and get the law to take Pierre away from his father."

"Mon Dieu! Is that true?" exclaimed her hearers.

The postmistress nodded impressively.

"It was I who gave him his first home," remarked Madame Perrault, more by way of drawing the conversation back to herself than for the sake of imparting knowledge.

The others paid no attention, and she was about to repeat her statement, when her glance, following that of her companions, fell upon Madame Dufresne approaching the group. Here was good luck. Who could know more about the matter than Pierre's cousin, seeing that the Curé had consulted her? Besides, there was always a flavour to her gossip.

The school bell ringing noon hour, found Madame Dufresne still in the midst of her recital.

"Misère! It is mid-day, and the children will be home directly." exclaimed Madame Perrault, divided between her desire to miss nothing, and the thought of those hungry mouths clamouring about the dinner table.

"But did the Curé say who had first touched the shrine?" demanded Madame Fiset.

Madame Dufresne avoided the question. "You heard what he said on Sunday. It is not likely M'sieur would tell."

Madame Fiset was but half contented. She would have urged the matter further, but just then, Madame Lebel interrupted—

"Voila! The school is out! There is Pierre himself! Pierre, Pierre Larrebais come here a minute!"

The schoolhouse lay between Lebel's store and the Church. Despite the noise made by the children, Madame Lebel's strident tones might have been easily heard at that distance had Pierre chosen to regard them.

"Michel, bring Pierre home to dinner," called Madame Perrault to her eldest offspring as he ran across the road.

"He won't come."

The woman waited. Pierre must pass the gate if he intended going home. He had separated himself from the rest of the children and came limping up the road at a faster pace than usual, looking neither to right nor left.

"Pierre, stop at the house, and Antoinette

will give you some dinner," called Madame Dufresne.

Pierre paused a moment, and looked at his cousin. Then he shook his head—a decided negative, which sent a flush of discomforture across Madame Dufresne's countenance.

"Mon Dieu! What can you make of that? It is unnatural, no other child in the village would refuse good food."

"And mine wait for it!" exclaimed Madame Perrault.

The conference ended. Madame Dufresne retracing her steps up the street watched the determined figure of the boy limping on in front of her. She felt justly annoyed. Not a word of thanks to anyone! And what a liar the brat was. She might have got herself into nice trouble with Vieux Joe. She fell to congratulating herself on her discretion—suspicion alone had kept her from communicating her news to the Curé—she had only half believed Pierre's statement. Mon Dieu! What was the boy up to now? Madame stopped at a discreet distance, her eyes fastened upon the little figure in front. Pierre, by this time, had reached the white-washed fence of

the Dufresne's garden, and suddenly found himself assailed by a new and quite reasonable temptation.

It was the end of September, the fields were growing bare, the woods left-strewn; a wind storm the previous evening had cost him a long tramp that morning before he could find vine or branch fit for the dressing of his shrine. Those he did find were not to his liking. He had decided at noon hour to climb the big hill by the lake and try his luck along the shore; but now, at his very hand, lay another and more desirable source of supply. Close behind those neat fence rails, great clusters of golden glow and pale anemones raised their hardy heads against chill night winds, and nodded, smiling, beneath the mellow sunshine—a last testimony to their owner's skill and diligence. There was ample space to slip one's hand between the rails and cull at leisure.

Pierre hesitated—his cousin waited. He glanced up at the house; the front blinds were closed, all was silent. A thin brown arm found its way between the palings, a brown hand grasped ruthlessly at a cluster of pale

anemones. Madame approached a few steps nearer that she might better witness the violation and deal prompt punishment. But the flowers did not fall. They swayed uncertainly, then almost in the act of violence, the hand withdrew. The next moment Pierre was limping with all possible speed towards the big hill. Madame gasped—then recollecting herself, she waited for either her husband or Antoinette to make their appearance. Doubtless Pierre had noticed someone watching him, and made off in good time. No one came. Two or three minutes passed; Pierre's pace had slackened midway up the hill. He looked pitifully small and lonely. Suddenly, without any very clear idea of what she intended to do, Madame Dufresne gathered up her skirts and started to run after him.

"Pierre, stop—wait a minute! Would you like some flowers?"

He turned around; one hand was clasped at his neck, as though grasping some concealed treasure. Seeing who it was, his face grew crimson.

"I did not take your flowers," he called back angrily.

"Would—you—like—some—flowers?"

Pierre came slowly down towards her, not clearly understanding what she meant—nor for that matter, did his good cousin understand herself. She had been caught, off her guard, by a novel impulse. So they stood, confronting each other on the hill; Pierre, half defiant, Madame still breathless. In the stress of the moment, Madame even forgot herself so far as to be natural; she laid a hand on Pierre's shoulder.

"Come, little cousin, let me give you some flowers for the cross."

Pierre looked at her; mumbled something inaudible, and then, together, they retraced their steps down the hill, to the Dufresne garden.

CHAPTER IV

Madame Dufresne Speaks Her Mind ..

THUS there arose a curious friendship between this strangely assorted pair—no doubt to the astonishment of both. Pierre came gradually to learn that Therèse Dufresne possessed a warm heart under all her affectation. Day after day, whilst the flowers lasted, he took his bunch with him up the hillside, and day after day, he waited for Madame to make some reference to his past duplicity or to confront him with some just punishment. When a fortnight had passed, and still the subject had remained unmentioned, the strain became too much for Pierre. Of his own accord one morning, he blurted out a sudden apology. At that moment it would have been hard to say which was the more embarrassed, Madame or her small cousin. She even failed to admonish Pierre against the evils of falsehood. Not until later, did she recollect the omission, and resolved to

amend it at their next meeting. But when evening found the boy industriously piling wood beside her icehouse, surprise once more overthrew Madame's judgment, and the admonition remained unspoken.

In his day and generation, old Onesime Laporte, the man of few words and little education, had striven to accomplish what he could for the betterment of St. Marguerite. In cultivated valley and spreading village lay the evidence of his work, crowned by the old cross, which was to link the whole to God. Now a new and more subtle influence was at work—the effect of which could not be estimated by trim garden and well-tilled acre—its unconscious minister, an untutored child, half elf, half savage, with features bearing a strange resemblance to the man whose curse had fallen upon his unconscious life.

The friendship established between Pierre and Madame Dufresne grew even faster than the Curé had anticipated; and, in its growth, thrust forth new tendrils as the days passed. Pierre had been one month and five days at school when an extra place was set at dinner time, in the Dufresne kitchen, and for the

first time in thirty years Vieux Joe was once more of the company who sat down in the old house. The village fairly gasped with astonishment.

Whether it was due to the good blood, inherited through his mother and grandfather, it is hard to say, but Pierre was a creature apart from the other children.

Though utterly ignorant, the boy was extraordinarily bright. In this respect Nature had done her best to compensate Pierre for his lameness. He mastered in a few days difficulties over which the other children toiled for weeks, with uncomprehending dullness, astounding Madame Berubé, the school-mistress, with his voracious appetite for knowledge. Once Pierre's intellect began to assert itself, the poor woman found encyclopaedic demands made up her. Fortunately for her, the boy's imagination filled in the gaps where accurate detail was lacking. It was this imagination which won for him his position amongst the other children. Unable to join in their rougher games, living as it were, under the protection of the Curé, and, with a certain importance attaching to his position as

guardian of the cross, he might quickly have incurred their resentment and dislike. Yet, they accepted him as he was, no matter how churlish or eccentric, by reason of his gift as a story-teller. Not that Pierre depended altogether upon his own powers of invention—the tales told by Vieux Joe at evening in the Dufresne kitchen, before Pierre limped up the big hill, were perfected to suit the demand of an eager audience after school hours the next day. Joe's fund of stories was inexhaustible, and what was more to the point, he possessed the art of narrating them. Madame Dufresne would start at the very shadows cast by her flickering candle, as she climbed her stairs after one of Joe's recitals. Not for worlds would Pierre have confessed how his heart thumped against his ribs at each rustle in the ditches as he hurried homewards as fast as his lame gait and the steep ascent would allow.

So the weeks passed, slipping on towards Christmas. The weather grew bitterly cold, and little by little dun-coloured fields gave place to white ones. Meanwhile, the old cross had once again taken its natural place in the village life, and Pierre Larrebais coming and

going with the other children, had become too usual a figure to attract comment. From all this it must not be gathered that the boy had miraculously developed from a half savage animal into a candidate for saintship. Such was not the case, for in most respects, he was natural enough and as full of mischief as other boys of his age. He would play tricks on Madame Berubé, break windows with the other children, frighten horses, and set traps for the unsuspecting villagers. In one respect alone was he morally the superior of his companions; since that morning which had found him an unwilling occupant of the Curé's study, Pierre was never detected in untruthfulness. Neither did he steal, nor play truant. He had made his bargain, and was prepared to stick to it; but even the Curé was obliged to attribute this morality to its true cause. At all costs Pierre was determined to maintain his rights over the cross.

Yet surely some unwonted influence must have been abroad, for strange things had happened in the life of Therèse Dufresne, when a week before Christmas, she and Joseph set out

for the Presbytery—bent, if possible, on securing a favour from M'sieur le Curé.

Once inside the Curé's study, however, Madame grew flushed and nervous; indeed, so far from her usual self, that, possibly for the only time in his life, her usually silent partner had to make known their wishes. Joseph came directly to the point.

"M'sieur le Curé," he announced, "we have come to consult you. We have no children. My wife and I would like to adopt Pierre Larrebais."

The Curé sat back in his chair, pressed the tips of his fingers lightly together, glanced sharply for a moment over the top of his glasses at Madame and her husband, and then shook his head slowly.

"That is impossible, my friends," he answered.

"And why, M'sieur?" Madame Dufresne broke in with her accustomed readiness, unexpected opposition putting to flight her temporary embarrassment. "Why may we not adopt Pierre Larrebais, seeing that he has no proper home, and his father is half the year in jail? Surely, there is nothing against

Joseph or me, that you should hold us unfit for such a duty." Madam's face reddened as she spoke. Perhaps she remembered a previous interview with the Curé, when her conduct had not appeared in so favourable a light.

"Tut, tut, my good Madame, it is not that. Pierre would gain infinitely by such an arrangement. But the law does not allow it."

"The law? Who makes the law, M'sieur le Curé, that a poor child cannot be sheltered and find a home from those who ill-treat him?" Madame grew more excited as she proceeded, so that, for the first time, the Curé witnessed her genuinely angry, her affectation shed like an old garment.

"Will you tell me, M'sieur, that when Jules Larrebais is released from jail after Christmas, he can undo all the good Pierre has gained in these months; that the boy will be controlled by that bad man, and that we, who have learned to love him, are powerless, M'sieur? We would bring Pierre up as our own son, and the law says no. Bah! What law is this? It is absurd; it is a crime!"

"I did not mean to tell you that, my friends,

for it is not quite the case. You may take Pierre to-day if you will, to your own home, feed, clothe, keep him, but you cannot legally adopt him. Two weeks from now should Jules Larrebais return and demand his son, you must give him up." The Curé paused, looking gravely at his listeners. Madame appeared wholly nonplussed.

"I am sorry," he added, "truly sorry, Madame. I had myself hoped, from the first time Pierre stood in this study, that something of the kind might be arranged. You have proved yourself good friends to the boy; he is a curious child, he knows how to win hearts. But I am powerless to help you. I have made enquiries; the most we can do, if Jules abuses Pierre, would be to have the law place the child somewhere until he is old enough to support himself. But tell me, would we ever get Pierre to go willingly, and what would be the result were he taken away from the one thing he cherishes? In this case, it seems almost impossible to protect Pierre; to me, his future looks dark. If you could keep him here as your own, that would be different; but Jules has his rights which the law upholds."

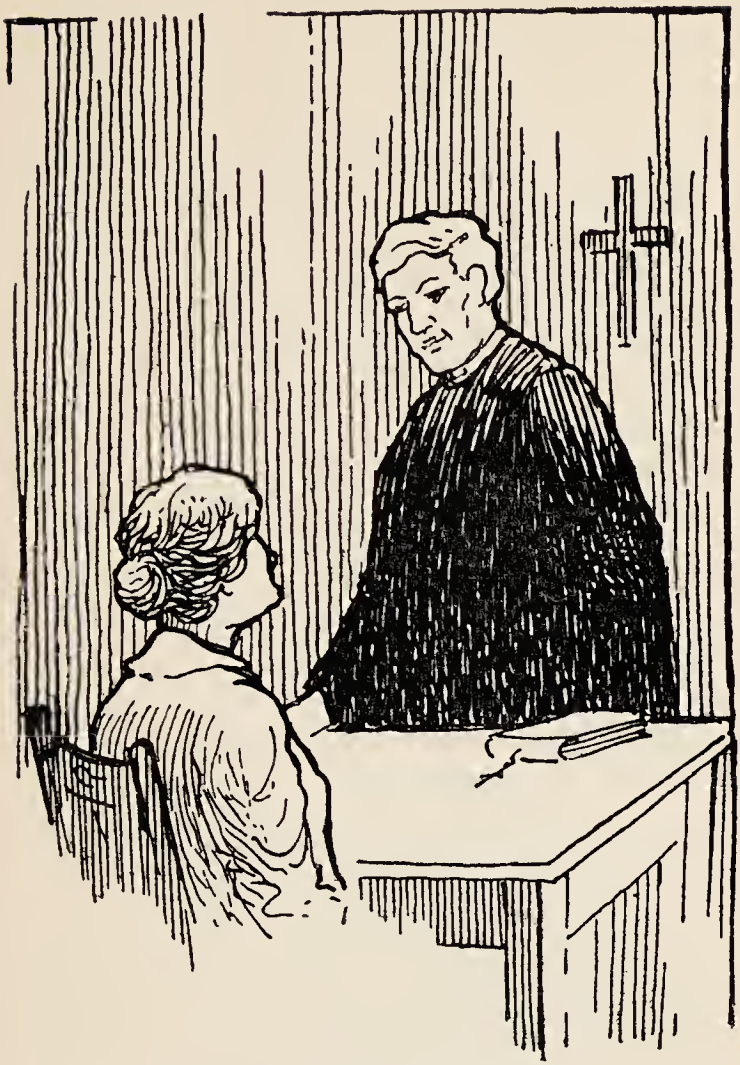
Joseph nodded comprehendingly. "It is too bad, M'sieur. Pierre will never go far with Jules Larrebais at his back, and he would die rather than leave his cross."

But Madame was not so easily diverted from her purpose. "It is all wrong," she exclaimed sharply. "Pierre has no chance at all. Heavens! If I made the law, M'sieur, it would be different. It is for that we send M'sieur André to represent us at Quebec? I tell you, Joseph, he shall hear my mind when I see him. Tell me, M'sieur, if you please; is there nothing we can do? At least when Jules returns, he is forced to send Pierre to school?"

The Curé shook his head. "No, my friend, the law of the Province does not compel education."

Madame Dufresne rose from her seat, her last hope frustrated.

"Mon Dieu, M'sieur, will you tell me what is the use of the law? It cannot provide this child with a good home. It will not provide him with an education. I tell you it is all in a muddle. Joseph Dufresne, it is time we



"Its all wrong," she exclaimed—
"Pierre has no chance at all."

found some place where the law is not so stupid."

Joseph passed his hand slowly across the top of his head, and glanced in a puzzled fashion from one to the other. He would have liked to provide some brighter future for Pierre.

"It is too bad," he murmured again. "It is too bad. But perhaps, M'sieur, you can do something with Jules."

"I will certainly try. But stay a moment, I am going your way, and we can walk together. I must see what these children are doing in the schoolhouse." As he spoke the Curé took down his hat and coat from their peg. "Madame Berubé was forced to leave early. I promised to have an eye on them. It cannot take Michael Perrault an hour to clean up, and he has not yet brought me the key."

It was growing late in the afternoon, the hour when M'sieur was in the habit of taking a quiet stroll before dusk had quite ended. In a few minutes he was ready, and they set off briskly in the direction of the schoolhouse. When they reached the building the Curé slackened his pace and, stepping close up to the side wall, so as not to attract attention

from within, motioned his companions to do likewise. All seemed peaceful. They moved quietly along to the first window and looked in through the frosty pane, not too obscure to render invisible the scene within.

The glow from the stove, the door of which had purposely been left open, served as the only illumination to break the gathering dark. Its light fell directly across Madame Berubé's desk, throwing a soft gleam into the darkness beyond. On the top of the desk sat Pierre, leaning forward, one hand grasping the edge; with the other he was gesticulating to a little group of listeners gathered about him. The boy's face was a study. He had forgotten himself completely and was absorbed in his narrative. As to his audience, their eyes devoured him. His own, in answer, flashed back a strange excitement. Even as they watched, some climax seemed to have been reached in the story; an exclamation, half joyous, half of relief, went up from his listeners, and the intent faces relaxed. The speaker ceased, and there ensued comment, question, criticism. Pierre sat proudly aloof, supreme

in a realm indisputably his own. The children pressed closer to him.

"Again—tell us another," they demanded. "Once more, Pierre, before it gets too late."

The Curé and his companions waited, their interest, for the moment, as intent as that of the children.

Pierre was yielding to entreaty. Both hands grasped the desk now; his legs, locked together, swung slowly too and fro; for a few moments he surveyed his audience in silence, then he commenced:

"My friends"—the words were quite audible and the Curé started at the exact imitation of his own tones, when addressing his flock in spiritual admonition. No doubt, Pierre merely found the form of address convenient, for as he proceeded his voice became natural, only more impressive and a little louder than usual.

Silence settled down upon the audience. The Curé touched Joseph lightly on the arm. "Come, my friends, we must not wait; it will not do to be seen here." Then as he turned away, he drew his handkerchief from his

pocket, and blew his nose once or twice before speaking.

"Could one imagine that?" he exclaimed. "Do you see how he holds them? That boy has a great future!"

Madame Dufresne, walking a few paces ahead of her companions, stopped, and turning abruptly, confronted them. For some time now she had kept silence. There were tears in her eyes, but though her voice trembled, the note of sarcasm in its tone was not lost on her audience.

"It is well to talk of a great future, M'sieur, but for my part I cannot see where it lies. There is no future for Pierre Larrebais, unless we expect a miracle, and le bon Dieu will have to work quickly, if he is to get ahead of our friend Jules. It seems to me the law is all on the devil's side, yet, we sit and wait for miracles. Yes, Joseph Dufresne, you may shake your head at me, and you, too, M'sieur le Curé, but I tell you both this—there is no future for Pierre Larrebais, nor any other child in this world who is denied a good home and education. And now, M'sieur, I will say

good-night. Yes, I am tired. I daresay, I am cross. No, Joseph, I am going home. You walk with M'sieur le Curé. I must attend to the supper."

CHAPTER V

The Return of Jules

MEANWHILE, what of Jules Larrebais, controller of Pierre's destiny? Madame Dufresne was right when she said they must act quickly, if they would outwit Jules.

Perhaps of all those interested, Pierre was the least concerned about the ominous shadow which obscured his future. If he contemplated his father's return at all, it was apparently without dismay. Question him as she would, Madame Dufresne could arrive at no satisfactory conclusion as to what Pierre thought upon the subject. Vieux Joe was probably right when he asserted that Pierre did not think at all. He was too well occupied. Jules had become a remote figure, to whom Pierre owed nothing. He was better fed now than he had ever been. Life teemed with interest—all the happiness he had known in his short years of existence was condensed into the present.

Christwas came and went. Then the last days of the old year numbered their hours. Bitter cold, they succeeded each other; towards the last, came lowering skies, and presage of storm—came also Jules Larrebais, his coming unknown to those who would have used every means to prevent it.

All his life Jules had done that which was least expected of him. In one respect only could he be depended upon—malignity would always supply the motive power for action; in what direction this would now drive him remained problematic.

For some days M'sieur le Curé had watched the railway station, so that no one might arrive at St. Marguerite without his knowledge. But there was no sign of Jules, nor did any of the train crews bring word of him. His term in jail had expired two days before Christmas. It was quite possible that he might remain in Quebec, and put himself in the way of a further sentence. The Curé would not voice this hope even to himself, but the Dufresnes did not hesitate to express it openly. On the other hand, if he decided to give existence at Ste. Marguerite a further trial, he

might arrive any day, and it might be well to see him before he ascended the hill and found the old cross restored and garlanded.

All these years he had held the cross merely to spite the villagers, fulfilling his malevolent desire in witnessing its gradual dilapidation and neglect.

Unfortunately for the Curé's plans, Jules came to Ste. Marguerite from the Concessions on the last day of the year—a Saturday, when the down train having passed safely out of Ste. Marguerite Station, Pierre's friends concluded that for twenty-four hours at least, no further precautions were necessary. Even under the circumstances, word of his coming might easily have reached Vieux Joe peddling along the Concessions, but as it happened, Joe had started on his rounds a day later than usual that week owing to the Christmas holiday and had taken a shorter route towards the south. Jules coming from the northwest encountered no one who was likely to herald the news of his arrival.

He had slept on the Friday night ten miles out of Ste. Marguerite, at one of the worst houses in the district. Starting late in the

"Jules came to Ste. Marguerite from the concessions."

morning he was overtaken by a lumberman, returning hime, who gave him a lift upon his sleigh as far as the Fifth Concession.

When Jules reached the cross it was three o'clock in the afternoon. He had allayed the irritability arising from an over-night carousal by numerous pulls at a whiskey bottle, carried in his coat pocket, but the fresh air and cold, together with the last hour's walking, had sufficed to keep him partially sober. Fine weather had given place that morning to grey clouds and a biting wind from the northwest. As Jules came within sight of his home, the clouds were each moment settling lower on the mountains across the valley, and the wind, carrying the snow in whirling eddies, cut across his face as he stumbled along the road —already the warning shriek of the blizzard was in its voice.

Turning the corner into the First Concession road, Jules came to a sudden standstill. At first, he gasped stupidly; then as though doubting his own sight, he turned and stared fearfully down at the village below, at his own shack some yards beyond, and slowly back again at the cross. It was a few minutes

before his stupefied brain could realize that this was indeed his own property. He had left stark, weather-stained wood, removed in all save shape, from the cross of former years; the shrine disfigured by decay and damp; the fence broken, neglect and age successors to care and piety. Before him he saw a newly painted cross, a shrine gay and shining; no speck upon the glass that sheltered the sacred image; the fence restored and garlanded now with evergreens, for the festive season, with an open gate giving access to a small well-shovelled plot. About the cross were the marks of feet that had come and gone since morning.

Jules advanced a step or two, unable to believe his eyes; then, with a snarl of anger, he ran forward, grasped one of the fence posts, and shook it as though he would tear it down. The veins on his forehead stood out; the face was distorted with rage; one hand caught at the neck of his shirt and tore it open. He was a full-blooded man and it seemed as though he were choking.

His first inclination was to rush forward and destroy; break the glass, tear down the

evergreens, deface and desecrate the whole. More than once he shook the fence posts. Then suddenly he stopped and a look of fierce cunning crept into his face. He glanced anxiously around to catch sight, if possible, of anyone approaching. No one was visible. With a parting glance of vindictive hatred at the cross, he turned and made off towards the shack. The door was unlocked. He opened it and entered. Here, too, a transformation had been wrought; the stove was alight, diffusing a comfortable warmth through the room. For the first time since Marie's death, Jules beheld his home clean and in order. The sight enraged him more than ever, but this time his anger was noiseless—the cunning watchful anger of a maniac. He listened to make sure the place was empty—not a sound save the wind whistling past the house. Closing the door behind him, he seized a chair and dragged it across the room to the side window which commanded a full view of the cross. A table stood before it. He pushed it a little to one side and drew up his chair.

Quickly he scraped the thick frost from

one of the square panes. Then with face close to the glass he watched and waited.

Meanwhile, in the village below, all were engaged in bustling preparation for the New Year. In the school-house, holiday mirth reigned. Madame Berubé's desk had been pushed aside, and, in its place, stood a large Christmas tree. Busy hands were working about it, Madame herself the busiest of any. When the tree was almost finished, the Curé looked in to watch the last touches. Only a few of the older pupils had been chosen to assist, Pierre amongst them. At six o'clock, all the children would gather to receive their presents, and, afterwards, in the Curé's big kitchen, there would be refreshments for parents and children alike.

Madame Dufresne had begged Pierre for once to spend the night beneath her roof. "For see, little cousin, we will have bad weather before evening," and had drawn an unwilling promise, that if no one else was bound in his direction, he would not attempt the hill alone, should the storm prove a bad one.

Now, when the last decoration had been attached, and the tree stood proudly arrayed

in all its finery, Pierre turned away from the group of admirers, and taking his coat and tuque from their peg, started off in the direction of his cousin's house, Bijou following close behind him.

Madame was in her kitchen superintending preparations for the next day. A big dish of sweet cakes, fresh from the oven, stood upon the table, and she handed one to the boy who munched it happily as he stood by the stove watching her at work.

"What is it now, Pierre, I thought you were still at the school?"

"No, I am going home now. See what Madame Berubé has given me."

He produced from under his coat a bunch of gay paper flowers. "I have just time to take them up before the fête begins. They are fine, eh?"

"Mon Dieu, Pierre, what a child! Can you not wait until to-morrow? The cross is fine enough with all those branches."

"But to-morrow is New Year's Day, and it commences just when the clock strikes twelve, and I will be in bed then."

Madame shook her head. "It is beginning to snow," she said, looking out.

"No matter, I won't be long. Good-bye, good-bye!" He had crossed the kitchen, seizing another cake on his way, and was out of the door before she could detain him further. In the past, no one had ever dared to seize anything without permission, in Madam's kitchen!

By the time Pierre had reached the back road, the storm was beginning in earnest, but neither wind nor cold could daunt him. He paid them no attention, other than to pull his tuque further down over his ears and thrust his mittened hands deeper into his coat pockets. Bijou, indeed, appeared to be more disturbed than his master, whom he followed with drooping ears and tail curled tight between his legs. He unfortunately could not share in Pierre's excitement, but was aware only of cold and snow, while affection bade him accompany his master even in the face of these discomforts.

Pierre, on the other hand, pictured the gay Christmas tree, and the coming fête; the great day, to-morrow, with dinner at the big

house, and Vieux Joe returning from his wanderings to narrate tales of adventure for his delectation. These thoughts sent him up the hill, light-hearted and merry.

The old cross came into sight gradually, waking as it ever did in the child, that same strange tenderness aroused for the first time on a summer morning, almost six months before, when he had newly realized its connection with his own life.

Cross and plot he studied carefully as he approached. The wind was very strong up here; it had blown down some of the evergreens near the gate, and he stooped to rearrange them. So engrossed was he in the task, that he failed to notice Bijou's unusual behavious. The dog sniffed deeply into the snow, running hither and thither, as though in search of a trail. He found it suddenly, and with nose close to the ground, made towards the shack where cunning evil eyes, behind the window, watched his coming.

Meanwhile, Pierre, having refixed the branches to his liking, moved on to the cross itself. With one mittened hand, he brushed the thick snow from the top of the little box

shrine, wiping the wet glass in front with the inner flap of his coat. Now he produced the flowers, and dividing them carefully in half, stooped down to arrange one bunch just below the shrine.

Bijou, sniffing on the doorstep of the shack, turned and fled suddenly without yelp or sound, terror driving him. The door had opened. Jules steadied himself on the threshold. Pierre fastened his bunch of flowers, his hand caressed the shrine, and he spoke softly. "Ma mère, ma chère mère, it is New Year's Day. There is a tree down in the school-house. . . . . ." A volly of imprecations broke in upon his speech, and one blow of a stick shattered the little glass of the shrine. With a cry of fear and anger the boy turned, throwing one arm upwards to protect his treasure. A heavy blow fell upon his face and head, a hot red stream gushed into his eyes, blinding him; then he reeled forward and fell. Jules stooped and shook the prostrate form, but Pierre showed no sign of life; he dragged the body across the snow to the shack; he was angry with Pierre for giving him so little opportunity of displaying his

wrath, but "he had taught the brat a lesson this time."

Pierre lay on the floor of the shack where Jules left him. It was after four o'clock, and growing rapidly dark indoors. Jules hated the dark. He struck a match and lit the lamp upon the table, then, finishing the remainder of his whiskey, he flung himself down on the bed to sleep until Pierre should require further attention.

CHAPTER VI

Storm

AN hour passed, then two, but Jules still slept. His breathing was heavy and irregular, now and then he broke into loud snoring, but no sound came from the inanimate body on the floor. Outside the blizzard had increased in fury, the wind shook the shack and found entrance through every crack and seam; the night was bitterly cold. At last, as though in accompaniment to the shrieking of the wind, came a faint sound of moaning. Pierre moved a little, turning his head restlessly. Then he opened his eyes and stared fixedly at the lamp, closed them, and again all was silent save for the sound of Jules' heavy slumber. Before long, however, Pierre's voice broke the stillness, his mind wandered.

"Vieux Joe, where are you? Come here, Joe, see the flowers I have. No, no, let me go! He will kill me sure! She was beautiful. . . . ."

For a long time the voice rambled on,

sometimes so low as to be scarcely audible. Suddenly, as if in the midst of delirium some dream had brought him face to face with reality, the tone changed. With a groan, Pierre opened his eyes, looked about the room and then sat up. Slowly returning reason battled for victory. He sank back, resting his elbow on the floor, his cheek on his hand. Little by little events grew clear; he recognized his father still sleeping on the bed; he remembered the happenings of the early afternoon, then came a gap. He tried to bridge it, but the effort sent darting pains like a red hot knife through his brain. Then in a flash it came. He struggled to rise, fell back, tried again and succeeded. The cross! the cross! His shrine had been broken; he must go to it! What voice was that? It sounded close to him. His mother was calling him! He would go at once! Hush! He must be careful not to wake Jules.

Dragging himself across the floor, he opened the door. Just outside, in a little hole close to the steps, and sheltered from the weather, Bijou had hidden himself in some old straw. He rose now prepared to follow his master;

his shrewd dog-sense scented trouble. The fury of the blizzard pitched Pierre back against the wall of the shack where he stood blind and tottering. The lamp within sent a faint gleam of light across the storm; beyond that beam lay the cross. Would he reach it? If he could hang his coat in front of the shrine, the snow would not reach her. She was like his mother—the only picture he possessed. He stumbled against the fence, passed it, and his hands touched the cross; he dragged off his coat and succeeded in fastening it by the loop to a small hook above the shrine. It had held many offerings, but none so costly as this. Now the wind cut through his woollen shirt and gripped him icily. Pain, too, laid hold of him. He listened. Hark! That voice again! But there was no gleam now across the snow. The lamp in the shack had just burned out, all was whirling icy blackness. Then in the dark something came close to him, an unrecognized form jumped against him, his feet slipped, and with a little cry he fell forward, his body resting against the cross.

* * *

"Vieux Joe had been overtaken by the blizzard."

Vieux Joe had been overtaken by the blizzard and his old mare—for in winter he made no attempt to make his rounds on foot—had taken many extra hours to cover her road. Fortunately, he was not alone in his box sleigh, one of the farmers had asked for a lift down to the village, and, for once, Joe was glad of company. It was after nine o'clock and the sound of his sleighbells was just audible approaching the top of the big hill. Though the village lay below them, not a light could be seen through the thick storm. Neither of them had spoken a word for some time. As they crossed the First Concession road a dog ran out at them, barking and whining. "Nom de Michel! what dog is that?" exclaimed Joe. "This is no night for the worst cur to be out." He drew up and strove to penetrate the darkness, but could make out nothing. The animal barked persistently, and, in the darkness, they could feel his efforts to clamber over the side of the low sleigh. Finally, one bound of vehement effort sent him struggling onto Joe's knees, whence he promptly tumbled into the bottom of the sleigh. He righted himself quickly and now

commenced an affectionate onslaught upon Joe—whining with delight, endeavouring to lick his face, and bestowing lavish caresses with his tongue upon the gloved hands. The pedlar, taken by surprise, pushed the animal off, and was gathering up the reins to drive on, when a sudden exclamation warned his companion that something must be wrong.

"Wait, my friend!" he exclaimed sharply, "I must see this dog." The beast meanwhile having signified his recognition was showing every sign of uneasiness. Joe passed the reins to the farmer; then he stooped down and fumbled in the darkness at his old portmanteau.

"Lean over here, and lend me shelter. I must light this."

He leant over and struck a match close to the bottom of the sleigh. It went out immediately, a single spark in the darkness. He tried another, this time it took; by its flame, he recognized Bijou, Pierre's dog. Joe grunted in confirmation of his suspicion, and then proceeded to light a small lantern, which he had taken from the bag, kicking himself free of

the blankets at the same time. He addressed the dog soothingly.

"There, there, little ugly one, I will look to you now. Where is your master? Bijou, we will find him. Quiet! Quiet! Do not knock me over!"

"What is it?" enquired the farmer.

Knowing Joe to be an eccentric man, he cursed him inwardly for chosing this moment to succor wandering curs who were better dead than living. "Where are you going? Can't you let that dog be?"

"Do not disturb yourself, my friend, I will not be long." Joe stepped over the top of the sleigh, sinking in snow to the knees, and took the road to the shack. It was unlike Pierre to leave his dog unsheltered thus in a storm. Joe's anger rose against the boy; at the same time a curious fear beat against his heart lest he should find something wrong.

Bijou pushed on ahead, looking back anxiously now and then. Joe did not make fast progress.

"Stupid dog, where are you going?" Bijou had turned aside and was making for the cross.

"Here, Bijou, not that way, fool—to the house!"

The dog insisted, looking back and whining urgently. Fear gripped Joe suddenly. No vague uncertainty this time; through the storm he pressed forward, his lantern before him in an endeavour to pierce the darkness. Directly ahead of him loomed the cross. Bijou had stopped and was scratching the snow away from something lying at his feet.

Joe almost fell in his hurried endeavour to reach it. With trembling hands he held the light so that its rays fell directly on the dark object partially hidden by a sheet of drifted snow. Yes, it was Pierre who lay there; Joe did not exclaim or cry out—he had guessed, even before his lantern revealed the truth. Pierre who lay with upturned face and throat bare to the icy night, one hand clasped about the little medal at his neck, while Bijou's warm red tongue endeavoured to recall to his little master's cheek the colour which had fled forever.

Joe set the lantern on the ground, and with a groan dropped to his knees beside the small still form; as he did so, something wet and

rough brushed against his face; he lifted his lantern once again to see what had touched him. It was Pierre's homespun coat, blowing outward from its hook above the shrine. Joe understood then, but not all. Only when he had brushed aside the snow, and stooped to place his hand against the child's breast, did he see the cruel marks upon Pierre's head and the dark stain upon the frozen shirt, which told their own story. The old man shook with anger.

"Mon Dieu! Mon Dieu!" he murmured brokenly. "There is evil work here! It is Jules' work, I am sure, and he shall pay! Sacré! He shall pay!"

He lifted the little lifeless figure in his arms and pressed it close against his breast.

"Pierre, Pierre, I have seen men die for a brave cause." His lips twitched, tears ran down his cheeks. "And you, too, my little one, you have given all," he muttered softly.

* * *

In the big kitchen at the Presbytery, feasting and mirth held sway. All the children had assembled, only Pierre's place was vacant.

They questioned one another concerning him. "He has been kept by the storm, poor child. What a disappointment to miss his first Christmas tree!" exclaimed Madame Berubé. "I told him not to go," exclaimed his cousin, "but what a child!"

She was anxious about Pierre, and not so easily reassured. Had some mischief befallen him? She knew her little cousin too well to accept without question such a simple explanation of his absence. Twice she approached M'sieur le Curé Did he think Joseph had better go in search of the child? But the Curé, genial in the midst of his flock, and engrossed with the duties of the moment, had no thought to give the matter, beyond a cheerful negation.

"Send Joseph out on such a night, my dear Madame? Why, he could not see his hand before him. Then, we would have to send you in search of him, and the next one in search of you. We would have all perished in the storm before morning. Pierre is a wise boy. He would not attempt to come down in the storm to-night. Calm yourself, my dear friend, his share will be kept for him, and I

have told Marianne to put aside his portion of cake."

At length the children gathered to sing their last carols, their voices rising triumphant above the shrieking blast which rattled furiously at every casement.

Up on the hillside that same blast shrieked unheeded. The occupants of a box sleigh hurrying towards the village, were too busy now with other matters, to remark the wildness of the night. The man lying in drunken slumber in the old shack near the cross was too heavily drugged to note how the storm shook and tore at the roof above his head, or how the drift piled against his windows.

Ah, Jules, these messengers have a word for you; wake and hear it now before it is too late!

Vieux Joe had muttered it as he stooped beside the cross, "He shall pay!" The wind tears at the old cross and it stands, creaking but upright against the storm. Pierre's jacket flies like a flag at half mast before the blast; the evergreens are broken under their weight of snow. The wind tears and strains at the shack with its unconscious occupant. The

snow piles higher and ever higher upon the roof. Presently above the storm comes a loud noise of crashing and cracking; it lasts but a few seconds; then the wind rushes triumphantly upon its way—one obstacle is removed from its course, and the snow settles and piles more closely down about the house. When the grey dawn breaks there is a high mound where the shack once stood, and somewhere beneath the ruin of beams and timber, crushed down by drifted snow, lies Jules Larrebais.

* * *

So ends the story of Pierre's cross. A chronicle drawn from many sources and traced sometimes with difficulty; touching on many lives, which through this one symbol, were linked together for both good and evil.

For many of us amidst the complexity of life it is difficult to unravel tangled circumstances, or to trace the hidden cause behind a series of incidents; but this is not the case with the villagers of Ste. Marguerite. Amongst them you will hear to this day, that Pierre met his death as a result of Onesime's

curse, and that God's judgment drove the storm that killed Jules Larrebais.

But the old cross—its plot gay with flowers as it keeps guard over the valley; the village lying peaceful beneath the evening haze; the long fertile fields basking in the sun of noonday; these are not suggestive of curse or judgment.

Possibly, Madame Dufresne may have come nearer to the truth, when she remarked to Monsieur Guillaume Gaspard on his return to Ste. Marguerite some two years later, as they stood one evening looking up at the hillside, "There is much evil, M'sieur, much wrong in the world, but in the end it is the good that lives. Old Onesime was a just man, he destroyed himself through his own pride, but he made Ste. Marguerite. And our Pierre—bien, M'sieur, what was he? A naughty boy? But he loved," and here the tears started to Madame's eyes—"and we loved him, M'sieur. Yes, in so short a time, we loved him, poor child, and to-day he lives for all!" She pointed up towards the cross. "Old Onesime and Pierre, they will never die in Ste. Marguerite—they have given us much."

They stood silent for a few moments and Monsieur Gaspard marvelled at Madame. Two years ago she could not have uttered such a thought; he judged, therefore, what the child's influence must have been.

"You remember how I spoke of him, M'sieur? Well, I learned to love him as my own—I, Therèse Dufresne, who have been all my life a silly woman, learned many things from that child! They say it was the curse of Onesime that killed Pierre, M'sieur. I say it was the sins of Jules Larrebais, and the need of a home and love that drove Lucille Decelles to a cruel marriage. What greater curse will you seek?"

The garden gate clicked and they turned to see Vieux Joe coming up the path. A yellow dog was at his heels.

"And what do you say to it all, Vieux Joe?" asked M'sieur Gaspard.

"To what, M'sieur?"

"To the curse."

Joe shook his head.

"But what did you think of old Onesime, you who knew him?"

"He was a true man, M'sieur."

"Have you nothing more to say? Why should Pierre have died so?—he was doing good."

Once more Joe shook his head. "I don't know. M'sieur le Curé will perhaps answer better. For they were a strange pair M'sieur —Onesime and Pierre—we had need of both." Joe spoke slowly. "Onesime was a just man, he was good, but we needed more than that in Ste. Marguerite. I will tell you, M'sieur, that all Onesime's work would have been forgotten, but for that little one whom he cursed, for Pierre brought love back to us, M'sieur, when Onesime had driven it out by his pride."

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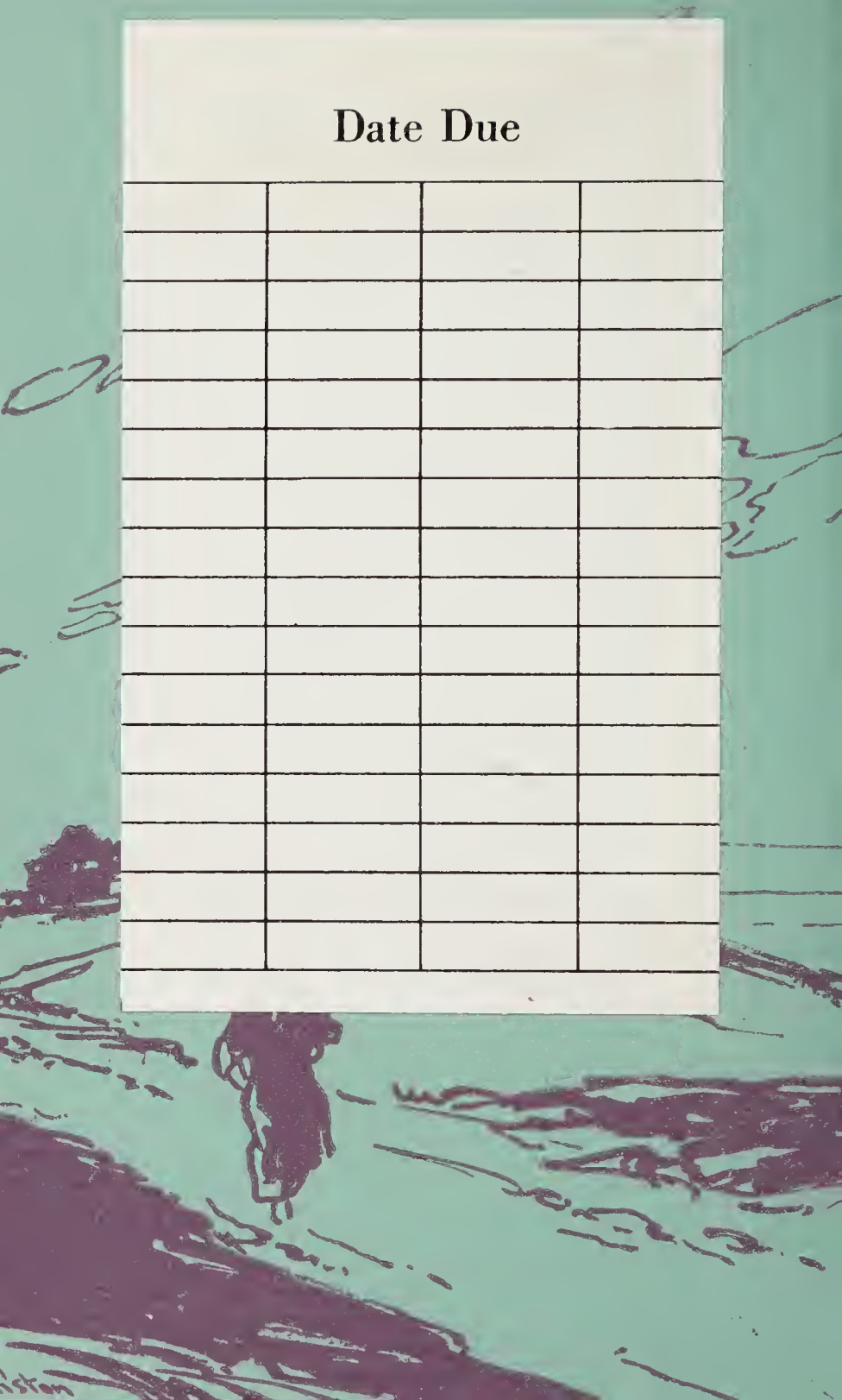

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